

#Blessed

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church

Matthew 5:1-12

November 1, 2020

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time with the word "blessed," which is rather ironic to admit to you after I've just read The Beatitudes this morning. It's just that, "blessed" has become such a trendy kind of word that more often than not, when I see it used on a coffee mug or a Facebook post or hanging on a shiplap wall, it tends to make me cringe.

Those of us who use social media know that "blessed" is one of the most popular hashtags online. A simple search of #blessed gave me 892 million hits in less than a second this week. I read things like:

- "After 2 weeks of quarantine, I surprised my closest inner circle of friends with a trip to a private island where we could pretend things were normal for a brief moment in time. #blessed"
- "I can't stop smiling. I just found out that I'm going to be a Gates Scholar!!! Now tell me there isn't a God. #Blessed" (followed by an endless number of praying hand and halo-face emojis)
- "Leaving Texas and thinking about my meal at Franklin BBQ. #Blessed"
- "I can imagine your envy that this is REAL hair from my very own scalp. We can't all be so #blessed can we."
- "Was running late for work today but snagged a parking space on the very front row. #Blessed"
- "I am so lucky to have 4 boys that are healthy, active, and so very loving. #Blessed"
- "Caught a piece of bacon falling out of my sandwich right before it hit the ground. #blessed"

Now, we can make fun of #blessed all we want (it's quite entertaining), but the reality is that whether we have named it this way or not, all of us have probably had a feeling of being "blessed" when things seem to be going well in our lives, and with good intentions. But I can also imagine that each of us, at one point or another, has felt pain at someone else's use of the word "blessed" – when perhaps our situation hasn't turned out quite like theirs.

For instance, when someone says God has blessed them to be doing so well financially – how might that sound for the person trapped by an endless cycle of generational poverty, doing the best they can to make it from paycheck to paycheck, if and when the paycheck even comes.

Or when someone says God has blessed them to be so happily married for over 30 years – what must that feel like for the person who is trapped in an abusive marriage, for the

person whose spouse passed away far too soon, or for whatever reason, the marriage didn't last like they hoped it would.

When someone says they are so blessed to have a beautiful, healthy, baby – I wonder what that must feel like for the person experiencing the gut-wrenching pain of miscarriage, or for the couple whose baby was not born healthy? Are those families – those babies - not blessed?

I fear we have been using this word “blessed” in ways that suggest there are winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, making it feel as if God purposefully blesses some and not others. And that makes me want to pause and reconsider when and where and how we use the word “blessed.”

Because it's not that it's a bad word! It's a word of deep significance in our faith, used in beautiful ways throughout Scripture to communicate God's goodness. But, it's as if Jesus knew, from the very beginning, that we were going to royally mess this idea up. And so in the Sermon on the Mount, in Jesus' first major teaching in Matthew's Gospel, he sets us straight about what it really looks like to be blessed.

But Jesus doesn't say anything about being blessed when life seems to be picture perfect. He says things like, Blessed are the weak. Blessed are the vulnerable. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who are brokenhearted. Blessed are the oppressed. Almost every single way we've come to understand blessing, Jesus completely turns upside down.

If we step back and look at these verses as a whole, perhaps part of what Jesus is showing us is that there is absolutely no person and no situation that is beyond God's ability to bless. And sometimes, when it feels as if life has been turned upside down, that's when God's goodness is needed the most, and that's when God's blessing shows up best.

Micha Boyette is a writer whose third son Ace was born a few years ago. Ace has Down Syndrome. And Ace's beautiful entrance into her family completely transformed her understanding of what it means to be blessed. She writes,

“Blessing has been on my mind lately. Not a shallow belief that if things are good, God is blessing us, and if things are bad, God has backed away. I quit using [that kind of] blessing years ago. Removed it from my spiritual vocabulary, done with assuming that God was blessing the rich guy and ignoring the poor guy.

For the past three months, I have fallen in love with a baby who was born with Down syndrome. And somewhere else another baby was born without Down Syndrome. Did God “bless” that person [and not me]? What does that even mean?

It is not that I am blessed because I have a special needs baby and we are the lucky ones. It is not that the parent whose baby was born healthy and typical is the one who was blessed. We are both/and. Blessed. Blessing works from the other direction. It is not the ease of the gifts God pours out, but the stance I take toward them. I am [like] Adam, given permission

to name the creatures, to say what I see. And I'm learning to see the holy every day, and to name it.

And so I will hold my hand out from the porch of my old gray house on the coast of Maine and call the sky and the ocean and the bald eagle flying past the same word as I call all of my little boys in their beds at night: Blessed blessed blessed. Extravagantly, excessively, overwhelmingly marked by the goodness of God.”¹

I don't know about you, but that's a version of "blessed" that I can absolutely get around. And that's exactly what I believe Jesus is doing here in the Beatitudes. He is taking everyday situations and people and experiences – spaces in which we might least expect God to show up – and showing us that yes – even and especially there, we can find the extravagant, excessive, overwhelming goodness of God.

As writer Jan Richardson points out, “There is no kind of situation, there is nothing in the circle of our lived human experience that lies outside God's desire for blessing for us, which translates to God's desire for wholeness - for us to have whole hearts...even when they're shattered.”

And she goes on to say, “A blessing is at its most potent in times of disaster, devastation and loss. When God's providence seems most difficult to find, a blessing helps us to perceive the grace that threads through our lives.”²

I did not have the privilege of knowing the beloved people whose names Carol listed for us earlier who are now part of our Great Cloud of Witnesses here at Highland. I have already heard many of their stories - and I hold them and their loved ones especially close with you today as part of our Highland family.

However, this year, I lost someone who was very dear to me back at Calvary– someone who will forever be a part of my own cloud of witnesses. Her name was Brenda Bradley, and you'll probably hear me talk about her in the years ahead.

Brenda was our music minister's wife, and she and her family were (and still are) like my family back in Waco. We traveled together on mission trips around the world. We shared countless meals around their dining room table. We celebrated holidays together every year when I couldn't travel home.

But Brenda was diagnosed with Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer in the spring of 2019, and she passed away just 9 months later on New Year's Day of this year.

Brenda started hospice care last October, and doctors told her she had just days to live. But Brenda continued to amaze us all. She rallied over and over again throughout the fall. She was able to host one final Thanksgiving, even making her famous homemade bread, she

¹ <http://michaboyett.com/cultivate-blessing/>

² <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/jan-richardson-stubborn-hope/>

attended her son's senior recital at Baylor, and she even returned to church to sing in the choir through the first Sunday of Advent – all while she was on Hospice. But as we approached Christmas, Brenda was getting sicker, and weaker, and losing her ability to really be present with us.

Our entire church was grieving in the midst of what is supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year.” And a few nights before Christmas, a group of us decided at the last minute to surprise the Bradleys by Christmas caroling at their front door. Brenda had been asleep the entire day, but we hoped that she might be able to hear us outside her bedroom window, even in her sleep.

Imagine our surprise when the Bradleys opened the door and invited us in, and Brenda was sitting up in her recliner in the living room when we arrived. It was about 7 PM, and they said it was the first time she had been up all day. Although she wasn't fully present, she had the most beautiful expression of childlike wonder on her face as we sang Christmas carols around the living room. Her eyes twinkled as tears fell down her face, and ours.

But the most incredible thing happened as we prepared to leave. As some of our teenagers, whom Brenda had taught in children's choir many years ago, told Brenda goodbye, Brenda, who had so little energy at this point, immediately put her arms up in the air as if she wanted them to give her a hug. And without even one hesitation, they reached down to Brenda and gave her a hug.

Soon, people were lined up around the room to share a few words with Brenda. And she got an almost giddy expression on her face as she put her arms up for person after person to give her a hug goodbye that night.

As Randall, her husband, reflected on this experience later that night, he compared it to an ordination service.³ Brenda bravely reached out her hands to receive a blessing from her community of faith, and children, youth, and adults alike lined up to offer a blessing to her, one by one.

But was Brenda the one who was blessed that night, or were we? The truth is that the whole night was blessing, and I will never forget it. Looking back on those nine months, I can tell you that this was the hardest and the most heartbreaking season I've ever experienced as a pastor. And yet, looking back on those nine months, I can also pinpoint so many moments, like this one, that were “extravagantly, excessively, and overwhelmingly marked by the goodness of God.”

Interestingly enough, today marks almost 9 months since the beginning of Covid-19 – and we have found ourselves in the midst of another hard and heartbreaking season. I wish we

³ Randall wrote pretty regularly throughout this entire experience at <https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/brendabradley2/journal>. His words are honest, vulnerable, pastoral, and offer a beautiful glimpse into their lives throughout this journey beyond.

could tell God that we've already hit our quota of hard things for the year – but it doesn't seem to work that way, as much as we would like it to be otherwise.

However, my hope is that we won't wait for life to be picture perfect to find the blessing – or the blessing may never come. My hope is that we, like Brenda, will be brave enough to raise our hands up to God and to receive the blessing that God is offering to us, even in these very moments.

Friends, may God bless you and keep you. May you have eyes to see the blessing that is all around you these days – and the many ways in which you are “extravagantly, excessively, and overwhelmingly marked by the Goodness of God.” Amen.