

## **Blessed**

Rev. John Allen

On my very first Sunday, at my very first church, a couple came up to me in coffee hour and asked me to bless their RV.

They had just sold their house, and everything in it, and bought it so they could spend the early years of their retirement exploring North America.

And they wanted to know if, before they set off. I would bless their RV.

And so... because I couldn't really think of what else to say.

I said, "yes."

"That's great. Thank you pastor." They said. "It's parked out back."

And so out we went, a bunch of us from the church, we went inside the RV and I blessed it as I might someone's home, we prayed that God would make it a place of love and joy for them as they embarked on this new chapter of life.

And then we went outside, and I asked everyone to lay their hands on the bumper, and we prayed for God's protection on the road, and to avoid any flat tires or engine trouble.

I am not really sure what kind of first impression I made that day. But I hope at least part of it was that we can bless about anything.

But I also remember wondering as I walked home after that little improvised ceremony, "what exactly did we just do?"

What does it even mean to bless?

I remember feeling a little embarrassed to myself. Shouldn't I probably know that?

Some of the trouble might come from how we have taken to using this word "blessing."

It has kind of become a word we use as a stand-in for any good thing, that we are willing to recognize we did not earn on our own. In common usage we might use the word blessing to describe our families, our homes, or our health.

And then there is what I would label a more scandalous use of this word. Go on Instagram and you can find the hashtag "blessed" adorning photos of luxurious vacations, expensive meals, and Hamilton Playbills.

And even just in our everyday language, we often use the word blessed to mean fortunate, or even lucky. We use it to mean that we got what we wanted. That things finally worked out.

And don't get me wrong. I don't mind people experiencing those moments as moments of blessing. At least inasmuch as it shows they understand at some level that their ability to enjoy experiences like that are a gift, and a privilege, that is not afforded to everyone.

But it is kind of interesting to compare the sorts of things we might routinely describe as blessings, with the list that Jesus gives us.

Blessed are the poor  
Blessed are those who mourn  
Blessed are the meek  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness  
Blessed are the merciful  
Blessed are the pure in heart  
Blessed are the peacemakers  
Blessed are those who are persecuted

And perhaps most strikingly: blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

In other words, as Jesus so often does, it is the exact opposite of what we might expect.

Jesus is pointing us toward the places where we might be least likely to experience blessing, and saying there, right there. God is there.

That is what blessing is after all. It is taking an ordinary thing and taking time to notice what is holy about it. Taking time to pay attention to the way that God is present where we might not have noticed.

It is an act by which we remember that God is in the midst of everything. A blessing is the speaking of good words, of words of hope, and love, and intention.

We bless homes, and RVs, to mark our intention that they be sanctuaries of love and peace.

We bless the dying to remember the promises of God that will not end when they draw their last breath.

The act of blessing is bold. It is our boldly faithful claim that God is present in the midst of our world, that God's love is real and alive not just in church sanctuaries, but in the places where we make our everyday lives.

One way to hear today's reading would be as a list that limits blessing. You could hear it as a list of conditions to receive blessing. You must be poor, meek, reviled, grieving peacemakers if you are to encounter God's blessing.

But I don't think that is quite right. I think this list is meant to expand blessing. It is God's way of saying to us once again that God's presence overflows every way we try to contain it, that God is not just present when things are going great, but God is present when things are at their worst, and hardest.

In fact I think Jesus is telling us that God is often especially close to the down-and-out, the hurting, the last, and the least.

I find it instructive to remember that when Jesus spoke these words of blessing, he was not presenting them as an abstract theological idea for the consideration of comfortable people.

He was speaking to the poor. To the meek. To the left out. The last. The forgotten.

He wasn't giving a lesson about blessing.

He was blessing people.

The very people who were sitting in front of him.

I wonder if perhaps his words were prompted by the stories he knew of those who were sitting before him.

I wonder if he was looking straight into eyes that were soaked with grief when he said blessed are the grieving.

Jesus is once again making the point that the traditional ways of measuring success and favorability, are not the way that God keeps score. And the kind of people who get all the attention are not the ones who are catching God's eye.

It has been 10 years since I had my hand on the hood of that RV. And in 10 years of ministry I have done my share of blessing. And I think I am starting to have an answer to what it is about. Blessing is an act of insistence.

It is our insistence that God is here. That God is in our hospital rooms. That God is in our homes. That God is in our relationships. That God is in our offices. That God is there for the best day of our life. That God is certainly there for the worst.

Blessed is not a synonym of good. It is not merely the condition of the happy, satisfied, and comfortable.

To call something, or someone blessed, is to endeavor, sometimes at great effort, to see where God is present, even in the most ordinary things of our lives, and even in the midst of grief and despair.

This kind of blessing is an antidote to the thought that prosperity is a sign of God's presence, and suffering is a sign of God's absence. Instead this kind of blessing insists that there is holiness packed into every corner of creation, and every moment of our lives.

After all when Jesus wanted to call people's attention to God's presence, he did not point at palaces and kings, he pointed at birds and shrubs, day-laborers, foreigners, and widows.

That day, he looked to the broken and hurting people sitting before him to say, I am with you.

He is looking with love on a broken and hurting world and saying, I am with you.

And he is pointing at the broken and hurting places in your heart, and saying, I am with you.

Blessed are you. you. you. Blessed are you.