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November 1, 2020

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

BELOVED, BLESSED

We, as people of faith, tend to talk about what we believe in, and hopefully, we do more than just talk about it. But in affirming what we believe, it also makes sense at times to say what we do not believe. I don't know about you, but I don't believe in luck. It is clear that some people have what are considered to be all kinds of positive things that happen in their lives and others have what seems like a whole string of unfortunate events. In regard to such happenings, there are certain things within our human control and others that are beyond it. Statistically, if everyone in society were treated equally, some small number of people would appear to get more than their share of lucky breaks, some other group would seemingly get more than their share of unlucky breaks, and a lot of us would receive a mix of what gets called good fortune and misfortune. That's what would normally happen if everyone got equal treatment from the earthly powers that be. But we know in our society, and to a certain extent in every society, some people are privileged and some are underprivileged because those in power have not gotten to the place of equal and fair treatment for all. As a result, those who are favored are more likely to have more good fortune that comes their way, and those who are disfavored get the short end of the stick a lot more often.

Jesus was speaking to a lot of folks who many would have considered to be down on their luck or to be among those disfavored by the powerbrokers when he labeled them instead as those who were blessed by God. This was quite a surprise, because the blessings of God were generally thought to come in the form of wealth and health, progeny and power. Those who didn't have such things were believed to be not just unlucky; they were viewed as being under a state of God's judgment, a divine disfavor against a person or group. They were seen as those who were cursed by God because of some current or past sin of commission or omission. Those who lacked in the areas of health or material possessions had even come to see themselves in negative terms. They thought God didn't care about them, which made their lot in life even worse.

When Jesus was offering what has come to be called the beatitudes, he was speaking to a lot of people who were poor in spirit, who had suffered the kind of destitution that grinds people down. In his audience were those who were mourning, who were grieving some kind of loss, which was caused by or led to physical or emotional suffering. Many of those listening to Jesus would have considered themselves to be the meek, who were without power to improve their physical situation. A lot of them were people who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness. They were in that state because true justice was scarce. This crowd did not understand themselves to be blessed or beloved by God.

And yet, they were intrigued by this man named Jesus, who not only did not believe that their sicknesses and challenges were signs of God's punishment upon them. He was one who prayed to God for their healing and his prayers were being answered, left and right. Matthew, in his gospel account, tells us that is what had been happening that drew the crowds wanting to hear Jesus speak from a high point along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

This Jesus articulated, demonstrated, and embodied God's loving care for these people, connecting with them in their place of need in order to help them recognize that God's blessings were being poured out in abundance for them. Jesus declared that those who were spiritually impoverished, who were at the end of their rope, were in the perfect place to put their trust not in the earthly powers that be, but in the heavenly powers that are so much greater. In that way, there was great hope for them to be blessed with spiritual enrichment. Those who were in mourning would be blessed not by their loss or sadness, but by discovering that God wasn't just way up in heaven, but would come to be with them, particularly present when they were in the depths. They would be blessed by the very embrace of God. The meek who felt powerless to change their situation would be blessed to alternatively find God-given purpose and meaning that could more than fill the whole world. Those who were hungering and thirsting for what was just and right, were not blessed in their pangs, but in that they were not satiated by empty values which would lead to empty lives. Such hungering and thirsting for the right things would lead to a blessed dedication to working for God's good will for all people.

Those first four of the beatitudes set the foundation for the other four. Once we understand that God is One who blesses us, then we can see that part of our being

more godly, of reflecting who God is, takes place through our sharing of our blessings with others. Jesus says that those who are merciful are blessed. Those who are merciful are ready to forgive those who have hurt them. Those who are merciful are ready to share what they have to meet the needs of others. Jesus says it is a blessing to live in this way, a way that reflects God's character and shows trust in God's provision. What's more, the merciful will additionally be blessed as they see others also grow in their capacity to show mercy. What a blessing when bitterness diminishes and community increases! Those who are growing toward being more pure in heart will also be blessed, Jesus says, as the focus for their lives become less self-centered. The pure in heart can then become more centered on God's presence and priorities, which is an additional blessing. The interior life, of course, is not the only avenue toward God's blessing, as those who enable peace to emerge from conflicts and brokenness are blessed to get to serve as societal and world healers. They too are blessed to be a blessing to others, as their actions show a resemblance and identity related to God. Finally, Jesus even sees it as a blessing to be those who get treated badly for the right reasons because their commitment to what is just and right is so deep that they have learned to give of themselves even when it is costly. They are blessed with understanding what is of value from a heavenly perspective.

These rich blessings from God for people in all kinds of situations are a reminder of what we are taught in 1 John, that calls upon us to not turn a blind eye toward but to see clearly God's love for God's children in all situations. Jesus helps us to know that the blessings from God are much broader and deeper than our natural narrow definition of blessing. Not just physical blessings come to us; our loving God who blesses comes to us in good times and in difficult times. We are beloved; we are blessed – that becomes more than just talk, particularly when we share God's love that comes our way, and we respond to our blessings by becoming a blessing to others. All of that is a whole lot better than any amount of good luck because it doesn't depend on us crossing our fingers for it to come about. Thanks be to God.