

Do you consider yourself to be blessed? In the Christian community we talk a lot about blessing, about being blessed, about asking for and receiving God's blessings. Just about every time we get together for worship, we say the Lord's Prayer. The word "blessing" does not appear in it, but that prayer is essentially asking God to bless us. Each Sunday, we conclude our worship together with a blessing. That is all well and good, but do you feel blessed? In what ways do you feel blessed? Or, in what ways do you not feel blessed?

Perhaps more importantly, if you feel blessed, how do you show it?

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus spoke of four blessings and four woes. In doing so, he took what we typically regard as common sense and common custom and he turned it upside down. Jesus had a way of making everything seem topsy-turvy. According to Jesus, the things that common sense and common custom described as desirable are suddenly said to be undesirable. As we heard today, Jesus takes what it means to be poor and what it means to be rich and reverses them. He says blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. And he says woe to those who are rich, whose physical needs are met, who are joyful, and who are thought well of by others. He turns upside down our normal way of looking at the world and our normal way of thinking about blessings and woes.

It is all backwards, isn't it? The world and life that Jesus is describing is backwards. Not as it should be. Maybe that is part of the point Jesus is making here. Because if Jesus was consistent about any message at all in his life, it was that things are not as they should be. The whole point of his birth, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection were to communicate God's truth that the human condition is not what it should be, and there is another way, a much better way of living.

That other way, the better way, God's way, according to Jesus, is the way of blessing. Jesus encourages us to believe in and to accept that God is the source of our life's many blessings, and Jesus encourages each one of us, in our individual way, to do our utmost to spread blessings among other people. Isn't that Christianity in a nutshell, receiving God's blessings and in turn conveying our blessings onto others, both receiving and giving blessings always in the name of God? I think it is.

I asked you if you felt blessed. I suspect that all of us go through cycles in our lives when we feel either more blessed, or less blessed. As the circumstances of our life changes, so too can our sense of being blessed, or not. But the one constant is that none of us are ever owed God's blessings. We are not entitled to receive God's blessings. The blessings we receive come to us from God as a gift, and often unexpected. Sometimes it can take a long time, perhaps even years, before we realize that an event or change in our life was a blessing. Sometimes even an apparent misfortune that enters our life becomes a blessing in disguise. The same can be true for the way that our actions sometimes become an unexpected blessing for others, which is why none of us should ever underestimate our potential for becoming, in our own small ways, conveyors of God's blessings for others.

As an example, here's a true story. There was a boy named Howard who grew up in the American Midwest. Howard came from a very poor family, and to raise money to pay his way through school he took a job selling cleaning products door-to-door. One day, while out trying to sell, and with only a dime left to his name, Howard was getting desperate. He was hungry, and so he decided that he would do something he had never done before. At the next house he visited, he would ask for a meal. He knocked on the door but when it was opened by a lovely young woman, he lost his nerve. Instead of asking for a meal, he asked for a drink of water.

The woman thought this stranger at her door looked hungry, so she brought him a large glass of milk. Howard drank it slowly, and then asked, "How much do I owe you?" "You don't owe me anything," she replied. "Mother has taught us never to accept pay for a kindness."

I interrupt the story at this point to say that the kindness shown Howard was a blessing.

Howard said to her, “I thank you from my heart.” Then he left that house and continued with his day. So difficult was his life, Howard had been contemplating giving up his dream of going to school. It was just too hard coping with his poverty and hunger and rejection. But when he left that house, having received the blessing of kindness in the form of a single glass of milk, he not only felt stronger physically. His confidence in himself, and his faith in God and in the goodness of other people had been restored also.

Many years later that young woman became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled by her condition, and they sent her to the large hospital in a neighbouring city where specialists could study her rare disease. One such specialist, named Dr. Kelly, was called in for the consultation. When Dr. Kelly heard the name of the town the woman was from, he immediately went down the hall of the hospital to her room. Wearing his doctor’s gown and facemask, he went in to see her. He recognized her at once, and immediately resolved to devote special attention to her case.

After a long struggle, the battle was won, and the woman was healed. Dr. Kelly asked the hospital’s business office to pass the final bill to him for approval. He looked at it, wrote a note on it, and had the bill sent to the patient’s room. When the woman received the bill, she was fearful of opening it. Her hospital stay and treatment had been extensive, and she expected it would take her the rest of her life to pay off the bill. When at last she read the bill, she saw the note the doctor had written on it. The note read, “Bill paid in full, with one glass of milk.” Signed, Dr. *Howard* Kelly.

That is how blessings work; blessings beget blessings. If Jesus had business cards, that should have been the slogan printed on them: ‘Blessings beget blessings.’

Perhaps you have heard the saying, “Joy that is not shared, dies young.” The same is true with blessings. The blessings we receive are not to be kept solely to ourselves; they are to be shared. The world greatly needs people who recognize God as the source of all blessings, and who in turn are willing to become a source of shared blessings for others. There is nothing new about the need for shared blessings. It has always been that way. It was the case in Jesus’ time; it is the case in our own time. Because, as Jesus demonstrated, too often things in life are not as they should be. Too often there is too much discontent that shrouds the blessings of this life.

Will Willimon, who is one of the speakers featured in our London deanery’s Lenten series mentioned in today’s announcements, commented that he knew someone who is a cardiac nurse. She assists in the surgery and the care of people who have seriously ill hearts. Many of her patients do not make it through the delicate, risky surgery. Some of her patients have a very difficult time in their lengthy recovery. It can be depressing, difficult work. Will asked her, “How do you keep going?”

The nurse replied, “I take walks in the park. I take an hour off for lunch and go to walk in the park. I see people who are happy, healthy. I see children playing and older people sitting on benches having a great time talking with one another. I am thereby reminded this is how things are meant to be. This is the real world. It helps me to keep going.”

What do you think? Are that nurse’s walks in the park an escape from reality?

I don’t think so.

They are a realistic engagement with reality. The happy scenes that she witnesses in the park are a sensible look at the way things really are and are meant to be. They keep her going when confronted by so much ill health and suffering, which is not how things are supposed to be.

I like to think a major reason we gather for worship on a weekly basis is to be reminded of what is real and of how life should be. And to be reminded that God is the source of our many blessings, and we are called in return to be the source of blessings for others, as we are able. **Amen.**