

Blessing is a Verb February 2, 2020

Unconditional love is an incredible thing. Once I watched a parent of a child who almost certainly had a personality disorder. A significant one. This child, we will call her Liz, would lie, cheat, steal, manipulate. She had no sense of or care for the feelings of others. When asked why she did terrible things she would say she was curious, or she wanted to, or she was bored. If she was not the center of attention, a major disruption would ensue. She was also charming. And she would be very affectionate – if there was something she wanted, or if it took attention away from someone else.

Her mother, let's call her Jill, had longed for this child. Waited a long time to have her. She wasn't an overly permissive parent. She was, in fact, sometimes pretty strict. And you could watch her melt when Liz would smile. It was a lovely smile. It disappeared as soon as the desired reaction was achieved from it. My friend hadn't spent much time with Liz and other kids. SO when she would hear complaints, it was easy for her to say kids are kids. Until we started to spend time together, and she was confronted herself with her child's behavior. It took a long time, but eventually Jill began to see that her daughter's behavior was beyond the realm of normal. By then there was evidence of animals, and other kids being hurt.

I'll confess, I had no idea how to tell Jill that the prognosis for improvement in someone like Liz who is not in regular therapy by puberty to really change their thinking is not good. But Jill wasn't dumb. She did her homework and found out for herself. And it was devastating to watch her realize the implications of a life

tied forever to someone who is emotionally dangerous, possibly physically dangerous, and lacking empathy.

The stark reality of who Liz was did nothing to change Jill's unconditional love. Nothing would. That was her child. And she would do everything in her power to help her, to protect her, to nurture her, even as it broke her heart and cost her dearly in all sorts of ways.

When we say God loves us no matter what and there is nothing we can do about it, it sounds all warm and fuzzy. It sounds passive. Just breathe and God loves you. No, that's all, just keep breathing. We forget that loving someone so much gives them the power to hurt you, disappoint you, harm you, and break your heart. God's unconditional love is not a free pass. It is a profound trust and responsibility.

I wonder sometimes if God looks at us like I have seen Jill look at Liz. Trying to figure out how to protect us from our own worst impulses, knowing we are unlikely to hear a word of warning or advice, clear that we will take any word of praise and hear it and it alone, disregarding criticism. Watching as we hurt the other children and wondering at what point we should be isolated for the good of our fellows and maybe for our own good, too. If we are isolated perhaps we will do no harm to our souls. God loves us unconditionally. And God would prefer to be in a loving relationship with us, not just a struggle to limit harm.

Last week we talked about Jesus mourning the loss of John. I am baffled that this doesn't get more attention in churches, or seminaries for that matter. Some of the most famous Jesus moments occur right after John is executed: the feeding of the 5000, Jesus gathering his disciples, the sermon on the mount.

The Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, are possibly the clearest distillation of who is best positioned to be in a loving relationship with God. And by default, it shows who has the most work to do to get to that loving relationship. And I don't think it is an accident that Jesus articulates this after John's death. John's murder, the state of terror in the land, the hopelessness that has overtaken the people is all brought about by people forgetting to return the love of God, and instead just assuming it will be there no matter what, or that by following a formula it will be magically assured.

In fact, Jesus does not say anything about being loved in the beatitudes. He says 'blessed.' We assume this word means that God has shown favor, chosen, loves someone, right? Yeah. Not exactly. The Hebrew word being translated here is ashrei. Which means happy in God's attention (as opposed to caught in God's wrath). Lots of people had positive attention from God but didn't feel so great about it: Jonah, Moses. Alternatively, it could be brk, barrack, which means up for inheritance, or noted carefully. There aren't direct translations. What it doesn't mean is 'all good.'

When we read the beatitudes without seeing how much work and effort goes into blessing, what the stakes are, they seem almost trite. They are anything but. If we love God and each other – in so far as we are able – the way God loves us, then the kin-dom of heaven will be here. Now. That is what is at stake.

The poor have suffered from our denial of God. God is now paying particular attention and the suffering will no longer be permitted. If we want to show our return of God's gracious love, will we allow any to do without? And if we do, what kind of special attention/blessing can we expect from God?

People leave us and there is mourning. How much more is there when we don't care for one another? See to safe working conditions and good health for one another? God is done with that: mourners will receive God's attention and be comforted, because when we care for one another there will be less reason to mourn.

The meek will inherit (meek meaning those made to be self-effacing from fear). It's about time: no longer will it be okay to make others stand beneath us.

Those who hunger and thirst for right will be happy in God's attention, because they will hold us to account. God will be pleased. God is so ready to be pleased with us.

Those who show mercy will inherit from God – because to show mercy is to let go of old accounts – debts forgiven, even if it costs you, because if we all just stopped putting the screws to each other...yeah.

See how it works? If we all decided to stop being passive recipients of God's love and committed to being in a loving relationship with God, we could, indeed, end the world's problems.

Blessing is a verb. An action word. It is a wonderful one. And a dangerous one, because plenty of people aren't going to like the new and improved, active and vocal you who is willing to start trouble here and now to transform tomorrow. But God assures us that no matter how upset they may be, no matter how upset WE may be by the sacrifices we will make and the discomfort we will feel, we will be infinitely better off when the kin-dom comes.

If we lived blessed as a verb and really pushed others to do so as well would we need food pantries? Would our economy be based on holding and collecting the debt of others? Would anyone despair of a livable future? Would any

politician think they could tell us just anything and get away with it if we were thirsting for right? Would there be war anymore if we dealt with conflicts early and wisely rather than quietly and greedily?

When Jesus gives this sermon, he is praying that John's death not be in vain. That God's unconditional love be more of a joy to God than a pain.

My friend Jill? Her daughter cannot help her behavior. She cannot be other than she is. God still loves her, without a doubt. We, on the other hand, we can help our behavior. We needn't be perfect, or right all the time, but we do need to be working like we want to be worthy of the kin-dom. God loves us all. But God entrusts some. And I know you want to be a part of the some. Amen.