

Matthew 5:1-16 “Identity Crisis”

Here’s a phrase I hear a lot: “I feel blessed.” And I don’t necessarily hear this only from religious people either. In fact, I hear it from non-church people. It’s a phrase that a lot of folks use to describe what they feel like when they experience good favor or good feelings. Here’s how I feel blessed today. I feel blessed because my dad is back home, doing well, and I feel like I’m catching up after almost four weeks of overwhelming non-stop busy. Your turn. How do you all feel blessed today?

Sometimes we feel blessed just because of the way we feel when we get up and face the day. If we feel particularly alive and well, we feel blessed because of the security or peace of mind that it brings. You might feel blessed because you’re in good health. You might feel blessed for a loving family. Sometimes we feel blessed because of some unexpected material gift. Maybe we won a prize at a raffle. Maybe we get a tax return that we weren’t expecting. Maybe we ran into a girl scout selling cookies and she had *one more* box of our favorite cookie! Maybe we received a scholarship that we applied for. Sometimes we feel blessed because a plan worked out well. Maybe we scheduled a trip to a place where the weather forecast was iffy, but it ended up being sunny and beautiful. Maybe we went to an amusement park on a day where the lines for the rides were short.

Then there are the times when we feel blessed because our hard work paid off. Maybe a business venture you pursued is successful or a project you’ve been working on turns out well. Maybe you got a job that you’ve been wanting and you worked hard to build a good resume and did your research so you could nail your interview. All of these are reasons why someone might say, “I feel blessed.” In our scripture this morning, Jesus uses the word “blessed” a lot, but most people pronounce it “bless-ed” because it sounds better when we read it out loud. The Greek word that a lot of scholars translate as “blessed” can also mean “happy.” So for example, if you read the Good News Translation, it will

say, “*Happy* are those who are pure in heart for they shall see God.” I suppose that makes more sense to folks who may have a hard time understanding religious language. “Happy” just makes more sense than “blessed.”

So the next question is, “What does one *need* to feel happy?” Or maybe a different way of framing it is, “What must one *do* to feel happy or blessed?” Well, if you talk to some folks, they may say, “Through hard work.” Nothing wrong with that. Some of the best and most rewarding things in life are the result of hard work. Where we run into trouble is when we stop to consider the values that we hold or the rules that we follow in order to work towards achieving happiness. See, according to some folks, the way you achieve happiness is to get ahead of everyone else. Why? Because there’s only “this much” happiness out there to have. It’s a valuable commodity. It’s in short supply. Some people believe there’s a lot more un-happiness in the world than happiness, so in order to get in on that limited supply, you’ve got to compete to get ahead of the pack so you can grab what you can. And to do this, you need to develop a thick skin. You’ve got to harden yourself so if you fail, you won’t crumble. Then you dust yourself off and go back into the race fighting even harder to get your share. It seems like some folks measure their success by how much time they spend *thinking* about their own happiness. If you are happy most of the time, then you must be successful. If you’re *not* happy, then you probably *aren’t* successful. So you need to be independent, aggressive, hungry and thirsty for higher status on the social ladder. You need to strike first so that you can quickly get the upper hand. Then you need to be ready to strike back quickly if others try to strike you first. You need to guard your image so that you’ll always be popular. Those are the keys to success. Those are the rules. And if you follow those rules, the likelihood of you being able to say, “I’m happy” or “I feel blessed” is much greater than if you didn’t. But these are the rules of the kingdoms of earth. And as you can imagine, Jesus rejects them. Why? Because his mission is to get people ready for *God’s* reign.

See, Jesus has an alternate take on what it means and what it takes to be blessed or to feel happy. Jesus defines success and well-being in a totally different way. Who are blessed? What kinds of people should we seek to be identified with? According to Jesus, the poor and those who stand in solidarity with them. Those who are feeling grief and loss. Those who don't resort to violence. Those who hunger and thirst for the common good and aren't satisfied with the status quo. Those who are merciful and compassionate. Those characterized by openness, sincerity, and pure motives. Those who work for peace and reconciliation. Those who keep seeking justice even when they are being misunderstood and misjudged. Those who stand for justice as the prophets of scripture did and who refuse to back down or shut up when they are slandered, mocked, threatened and harmed.

In Matthew's gospel, what Barbara read is the first example of Jesus' public teaching. It's commonly known as "The Sermon on the Mount." And what a sermon! He didn't start out with a joke or a clever story like a lot of modern-day preachers do. He goes right into turning all of the social standards ... all of the social norms *upside down*. I can just hear how the powers that be might have reacted back then. "What do you mean 'blessed are the meek' and 'blessed are those who mourn' and 'blessed are the ones who are persecuted?'" Those aren't things that make a person happy!" See, the heroes of the day ... the ones who everyone *assumed* were happy and blessed were the warriors. The merchant class. Those who were in the political arena. But here's Jesus lifting up people who were at the bottom. He's lifting up these ... snowflakes who are willing to suffer with him because he's all about upholding this Jewish prophetic tradition that celebrates "justice" and "mercy" and "humbleness." Daggone those self-righteous prophets anyway! How in the world did they even make it into the Bible? Hosea and Joel and Amos and Obadiah. Don't even get me started on Micah! You know that "justice" is just one of those code words that those bleeding heart "have nots" use when they're trying to get something they don't deserve!

Yeah, Jesus definitely stirred the pot back in his day. One hundred and forty one words into his first sermon and already he's stepping on people's toes. And you want to know what's bothersome about this whole deal? We say that we're Jesus' disciples. And because we've made the choice to proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world and carry out his mission, we can't coast along and conform to the norms of our society. As Disciples of Christ, we need to assume a different model of what it means to be blessed or happy. And in order to do that, we need to assume a new identity. And Jesus promises that we'll pay a price for this new identity too. But he also says there will be rewards. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account?!" That doesn't sound very good. "For your reward is great in heaven." Well ... that *does* sound good. Talks about an identity crisis!

And yet this new identity will give us a very important role in the world. We'll be able to make a difference. We'll be change agents. We'll be the salt that brings out the best flavors in our community. We'll be the light that penetrates the dark places where corruption tries to hide. But we can't lose our "saltiness." We can't hide our light under a bushel. Oh we'll be tempted for sure. Especially when we receive pushback for being all bright and salty. The powers and principalities of this world will want to tame us ... tone us down. But Jesus challenges us to stand apart from the status quo and stand up for that which *matters*. He challenges us to stand out as part of the solution rather than be a part of the problem.

Here's another thing to think about when we're talking about what the world says we need to do in order to be happy or feel blessed. In order to achieve the kind of happiness that the world says is legitimate we need to be thinking about "me." In the world's opinion, happiness is just waiting for people who are all about "me-me-me." Look out for yourself, because nobody is going to be looking out for you. But under God's reign, the key to being blessed involves shining the spotlight on others. Notice how Jesus does this. "*You* are the salt of the earth. *You*

are light for our world.” Sure, there were times and places where Jesus had to declare who *he* was, but he starts his ministry out talking about who *we* are.

In order to help make the world a place where justice, mercy, and humbleness are core values, we need to have a new strategy. And the new strategy starts with a new identity. In Romans 13, Paul tells the church in Rome to clothe themselves in Christ. Shed the old identity, and adopt the new one. Reflect on who you are, who you want to be, and what kind of person you want to become.