

November 18, 2007

Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### **Blessings free, Turkey Optional**

Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who hunger, blessed are those whose hearts are broken, whose tears are falling, blessed are those who endure persecution. These phrases in the Gospel of Luke warm our hearts. Ours is a God who cares about the pain and suffering of humanity. Ours is a God who offers comfort to those who suffer. Ours is a God of compassion. This is a God we want to know. This is a God we want to worship. This is a God who is not aloof, but ever present in the realities of life on earth.

Having said that, none of us would personally seek the blessing of being the one who is poor or the one who is brokenhearted. We cannot imagine finding blessing in being hungry or having hungry children. Certainly, we are not going to seek out the blessing of persecution.

The reward of our faith we are told is not in this life, but in life beyond this life. Yet, as we live in America in 2007, we have based our lives on seeking reward here and now. We do our very best to avoid the struggles of poverty and hunger. We limit our tears and pray that our hearts and our lives will know no harm.

It is a comfort to know of God's compassion, but honestly, none of us want to be the ones in need of such compassion.

However, the passages that follow offer us reason for discomfort as well.

Luke 6:14 - 26

Woe. That woe is spelled, woe. After hearing the woes in this passage, from the depth of my soul I cry out a different "Whoa!" Stop! Halt!

I do not want to hear about these woes. I am the rich; I have comfort. I obviously do not go hungry. And who here would deny that we love it when others speak well of us. Stop with the woes!

This passage is considered one of the more difficult teachings of Jesus. We much prefer a similar passage in the Gospel of Matthew that lists nine blessings, and no woes. Jesus is proclaiming life inside and outside the realm of God. It is the reality of here and now and of an eternal future. The beginning of this section of teaching says, "Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place." His teaching levels the field of life. Blessed are those who love God even if they are living in the margins in this life. Woe

to those who are self satisfied and choose to be disconnected from the love and compassion of God. It was true in the time and place of Jesus that those who were prospering were most likely doing so at the expense of others. Not only were those who were wealthy taking advantage of others, but also turning away from their faith teachings.

Then as now, if we spend our time and energy pursuing that which the world values, we may very well achieve those dreams, but our account will be paid in full here and now. Enjoy it now because it will be all we ever have.

Am I serving guilt this Thanksgiving? Absolutely not! Here is our reality. We are not only blessed when the children are well, when the job is great and there is more food than the table will hold. As we gather and offer our gratitude to our God this week, may we be clear that blessing is not based on our "success" in this life. Even if the children are ill or struggling, even if work brings no joy to our days, even if there is little food on the table this year, we are still blessed. The blessing of God is with all who will embrace God's love. God is with us through thick and thin.

I have always felt sad for Moses. Kevin read the passage this morning that reminds us that Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses who wandered the desert for 40 years searching for the Promised Land was not the one to lead the people across the Jordan River to that land. Moses would lead the Israelites to the threshold, but it was Joshua who would take the people into the Promised Land, not Moses. Moses did all the work, Joshua received the benefit. Yet, Moses and Joshua were both blessed by God. God is with us on the journey through life, God is with us when we wander and God is with us when we arrive at our planned destinations. God takes the journey through the good days and the difficult days with us. For those who love God never journey without God's blessing. Our faith is not an insurance policy against all that life might throw at us. Faith is an assurance policy that assures us that God is with us no matter what life throws at us.

I spent the first week of November in D'Iberville, Mississippi on a mission trip. It was a wonderful experience. Seven of us from Meridian Street worked with a family whose home was badly damaged in the wind and waters of Katrina. Theirs was one of the few houses in an area near the water that withstood the devastation of the storm surge. It has been a long two years for them. They live in one of the very small FEMA trailers. You would have to see it to believe it. To make matters worse, not only is the trailer terribly small, but while we were there the headlines in the news spoke to the fact that 48,000 people are still in FEMA trailers and the trailers have issues with formaldehyde. The couple we worked with, Genny and Kirk, have spent two years in their trailer. Though their house stood up to the storm, it has been inhabitable. In addition to the destruction of their own home, the many homes around them that were completely

destroyed landed in their front yard. They spent months removing debris to even get to their front door.

Yet, Genny and Kirk call themselves blessed. I assure you that their situation is a blessing none of us are seeking. Their home is just now getting to a place where they will be able to live in it. Their blessing is that they survived, their home was not completely destroyed and people have come to help them. Their blessing is that in the midst of significant financial strain, personal loss and daily stress, they are clear that God is with them.

Blessing is not dependent upon our being happy, or successful, or well liked. We are all blessed no matter what our circumstances. God's blessing is available to all. To all of us who have known benefits in this world comes the mandate to offer the compassion of our God, to offer the passion of Jesus the Christ, to share our gifts with others. The ultimate blessing will be that we receive far more than we give.

It seems to me that even Christians have confusion about blessing. Our blessing is not contingent on our life going well. We are blessed even when we are afraid, even when we are ill, even when we grieve, even when absolutely everything seems to be going wrong. We are blessed, not by our efforts, or our reality, but by God's grace.

Whoa to the woes. We are blessed no matter what. If we are also filled with bounty in this life, we are given the added opportunity to be blessing in the life of another. No need to serve guilt this Thanksgiving. Rather, let's find in this season the inspiration to celebrate our gifts from God and seek the opportunity to share our gifts with others.

I saw an ad in the Indianapolis Star last Wednesday that invites us to help support the Wheeler Mission by donating toward Thanksgiving meals. Less than \$2.00 will make a Thanksgiving meal possible for one who is in need. Better yet, invite someone who might not otherwise have a Thanksgiving meal to your meal. It is not too late to make the donation or the invitation.

On the way to the Methodist Church in D'Iberville, we passed another church. It was a beautiful red brick church with white columns. It showed no signs of the disaster in their midst. The lawn was manicured and it seemed almost surreal in that area. When we arrived at the Methodist Church we found a trailer on the front lawn being used to help in the recovery efforts, on the side lawn building materials were stacked, behind the church was the building where the volunteers were staying and to the back of the property was a large warehouse storing all sorts of supplies and tools. What a contrast between the two churches. It was instantly clear that the United Methodist Church was in ministry in the recovery process. They had the look of the mess of ministry. The sight was a reminder of why I am a United Methodist. We not only acknowledge that we are blessed, but we also live out our call to be blessing in the lives of others.

We who have much are called to share from our bounty. But may we be clear we are not blessed because we have much, we are blessed because God has declared it so and blessing comes to all who would love the Lord.

I have no idea who will be at your table this week. I have no idea if you will have a bounty from the harvest or a peanut butter sandwich. Either way, know that you are blessed. You have the blessing of the day, the love of Jesus Christ and this community of faith that cares for you. The blessings are free, turkey, that's optional. It is not the turkey that makes the day; it is the love of God that makes each and every day.

Kirk, the homeowner from Mississippi told me that there is so much broken glass in his yard from all the windows, mirrors and glassware that broke from the many houses that landed in his yard, that at night, his yard glitters. It is a reminder to him of the tragedy, but it has become something beautiful to him as well. I am sure that over time, that glass will work its way into the sand/dirt of his lawn, but for now, out of the tragedy, out of the ruins, there is beauty. It comes as a reflection of the moon and the stars each night in the chips of glass and mirror that surround his house.

He and his wife are blessed and they know it. The greatest gift of the trip was that they openly shared their sense of blessing with the seven of us who went on the mission trip. By extension, it is a gift that has been given to all of us. Even in the midst of a tragedy, even living in what Kirk calls his "can-do-minium", even as their home still stands empty, even as their financial realities are staggering, even in the midst of having family members move away, even in the midst of all that and much more, they will celebrate this Thanksgiving as a people blessed. How about you? In the midst of the struggles in your life are you confident of your blessing? More importantly, if yours is abundance, are you confident of being blessed by God and empowered to be a blessing to others?

I realize that our trip to Mississippi did not change the face of that terrible disaster. Yet our journey did make a difference in the life of one family. One family who lives their faith in difficult circumstances shared their blessings with us.

Rejoice this week and count yourself blessed and by all means find a way--some way--to be blessing in the life of another.