

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 30, 2011
Matthew 5:1-12

Epiphany 4, Year A

What are the blessings in your life? Some of the first things that come to my mind are that my family and friends are blessings, my health and safety are blessings, my food and my home are blessings.

We usually think of blessings as things which make us happy and content. We very often have a view that if we are happy, prosperous, have loving families and a good position in society, these things mean that we are blessed by God. There is certainly some truth in the idea that the good things in our lives are gifts from God, and it is wonderful to be grateful for them.

We have heard the beatitudes so often that we have been lulled into thinking of them as quaint. But when Jesus talks about blessings, they are actually startlingly different from everything we consider blessings to be. What are the blessings in our lives?

We might think the powerful are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are the meek.

We might think people who are always sure of their faith are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit.

We might think people who are surrounded by family and friends are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are those who mourn family and friends who have died.

We might think people who have righteousness are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

We might think people who are not hurt are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are those who are merciful to people who have hurt them.

We might think people who are victorious are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are the peacemakers.

We might think people who are well respected and have status in society are blessed, but Jesus says blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

What are the blessings in our lives? The Greek word for "blessed" that Matthew uses here, shows up 44 times in the New Testament. Not once does it refer to prosperity.

Not once does it refer to good health. Not once does it refer to having children. The word blessed always refers to people who believe and people who obey God. The word blessed shows up in these beatitudes in Matthew's gospel, and in the beatitudes in Luke's gospel, which are even more surprising: blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who weep.

It seems so obvious that life is a mix of bad and good, life is a mix of pain and pleasure, life is a mix of vices and virtues, life is a mix of losses and gifts. It seems so obvious. The obviousness that life is a mix of good and bad is what makes our questions about the bad parts of life so odd. And yet we humans seem to have a hard time accepting such a simple concept as this mix. We act as if we think the existence of the good means that the existence of the bad is impossible. Or we act as if we think the existence of the bad means that the existence of the good is impossible. That attitude shows up in statements like, "I can't believe in the existence of a good God when bad things happen in the world." That idea may seem to make sense on the surface, but when you look at it more closely, it's saying the universe has to be either 100% good or 100% bad, no combinations are allowed in the universe.

To say that a good God shouldn't allow any bad things to exist is to say that life must never be mix of good and bad, pleasure and pain, virtues and vices, losses and gifts; to say that a good God shouldn't allow any bad things to exist is to say that life must be absolutely perfect all the time or God's goodness can no longer exist. So Jesus says, "Hey guys, relax. Life is a mix of good and bad. God's here when you're in the good parts and God's here even when you're in the bad parts."

And Jesus tells us something more in these beatitudes. It's not like there are little sections of life where God's goodness exists and the rest of the world is godforsaken. What Jesus is telling us here is that God's blessedness flows through all of life, not just the pretty sections. God's in it with us, no matter what. The crucifixion is God's way of showing us that when God says that he's in it with us no matter what, he really means he's in it with us no matter what. And God is in it with us no matter what, not because God is incapable of stopping bad things from happening; God is in it with us no matter what because God wants to be, because God loves us with all the goodness and badness mixed up in us.

In Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* a character named Kate says, "God does not let a son be killed by his father." Since her theology has no room for the bad things that human beings do to other human beings, she resorts to denial and deception, and we gradually see the way her denial and deception destroy her life and the lives of the people around her. It is a theology of denial: "God does not let a son be killed by his father." When I come across that line I think of what a stark contrast it is with a theology that has a crucifixion at the center of it, in which God does let a Son be killed by his Father. A theology that can include a crucifixion has room for the worst as well as the best. To take the bad and the good means there is no need for denial and deception.

Arthur Miller is brilliant in exploring the depths of denial and deception in this play, and that makes it a play worth seeing. And you can see it right here in the Northern Neck because the Westmoreland Players is performing it starting February 19th. Miller is a playwright who is well acquainted with the darkness in human nature. At the same time, he also creates a character in this play named Lydia. Lydia is interesting because there is no real need for her to exist in this play. She does not cause any action in the play, she doesn't convey any information that isn't conveyed elsewhere, her interactions with the other characters are pretty superfluous. So what is she doing there? Miller describes Lydia as a robust, laughing girl of 27. When the other characters talk about her they associate her with smiles, laughter, beauty, good food, good sex, good fertility. She makes beautiful clothes and hats and fixes Kate's hair to make her beautiful too. She makes things nice for other people. She asks for help without being whiny, and she gives help without being codependent or manipulative. She accepts her own flaws easily and immediately, with an endearing laugh. She clearly loves her family and her neighbors even when they are stupid or selfish or mean. When something bad happens to her neighbors, she is sympathetic. When a relationship with a man she cares about doesn't work, she handles the loss by letting go of him with compassion rather than bitterness, and she goes on to a relationship that will work.

Lydia is a great character, and an actor would be happy to get a role like that.

I think the reason Miller put her in this play is that while he plumbs the depths of deceit and denial, even Miller wanted to acknowledge that there is an alternative to deceit and denial. I expect that Lydia's easygoing acceptance of the bad parts of life is exactly

what enables her to take delight in the good parts of life. Lydia has only 26 lines in the play, and they do not include an exposition of her theology. But the theology that seems to fit her best would be the one that Jesus expresses:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

The play *All My Sons* ends tragically. But if the story continued after the curtain went down, I expect that Lydia would not deny the tragedy. She'd be more likely to show up to comfort people, maybe with a handful of flowers, or a loaf of freshly baked bread, or a shoulder to cry on. She would not try to separate the good and the bad, the pleasure and the pain, the virtues and the vices, the losses and the gifts. She would accept all the parts of our mixed-up lives together, and find the blessedness in all of it.

What are the blessings in your life? Or is the whole mix a blessing? I expect that to discover God's goodness in all of life, the good and the bad, is to be truly blessed.

God bless you.