

Whenever I read the Beatitudes, I connect them to people in my life who “walked the walk.” They were truly poor in spirit and mourned harder than anybody. They were big time meek, meeker than most. They hungered and thirsted for righteousness like baby birds waiting for their mama to feed them.

The problem with that connection is something I’ve struggled with since I was a child. I always idolize those I look up to, almost irrationally, like they can make no mistakes. My grandma was just as compassionate as she was irritable. A family friend was just as gentle and wise as she was unapproachable and intimidating. For every time an ex-boyfriend kissed my forehead and affectionately called me his “babe”, he smoked ten cigarettes. But the good news is that we are not blessed in spite of our imperfections, but because of them.

Jesus chose to surround himself with people who were told by the Roman Empire that they were unclean, less-than, not good enough in the eyes of God. When people hear a message that is poignant and destructive enough, they internalize it. It’s a lose-lose situation. Your social capital is being relentlessly taxed by those in authority, keeping you from practicing the privileged laws that keep you “perfect” by their definition. How can you help but be irritable? How can you help but hide your self-loathing behind a tough exterior that makes you seem unapproachable and intimidating? Maybe you even turn to whatever vice soothes your troubled soul to relieve that troubled feeling.

Jesus saw through the Empire’s thinly veiled hatred. He preached a sermon on that mountaintop to help them unlearn that toxic message that you’ve got to be perfect to earn God’s favor. “What this world teaches you is blemished, God recognizes as blessed. What this world views as imperfect about you, God sees as something beautiful that needs to come out and shine. What this world insists is a waste of time and a hindrance to success—things like generating community and serving people and showing love above all else—God declares as good and urgently necessary. You are blessed,”

Jesus brings a kin-dom ruled by the crucified one and populated by the unclean and always found in the unexpected. The kin-dom of heaven Jesus talked about all the time, is here. It’s at hand. It’s now. Wherever you are, in ways you’d never expect.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven. Not because they lack in possessions or quality of life, for there is no virtue in poverty, but because their heart is free from always needing more. They know inner contentment. Blessed are the agnostics and the doubters, those who can still be surprised. Blessed are the spiritually impoverished and those who feel they have nothing to offer. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the pre-schoolers who cut you in communion line. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Not because they whimper and make victims and martyrs of themselves, for there is no virtue in sadness. Rather because they raise their voices, allow the pain to be felt and heard, and choose the comfort at the right time of moving on. Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who can’t take a thing for granted, those who can’t fall apart because they have to be strong for others. Blessed are the parentless, the chronically lonely, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are those who “still aren’t over it.” Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth. Not because they are soft, for there is no virtue in being dominated, but because they patiently and firmly assert their own place and value in the earth. Blessed are the students who sit alone in their elementary school cafeteria, the laundry guys, the sex-workers and street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the chronically ill and the babies. Blessed are the parts of you that don't want to make eye contact with a world that only loves winners. Blessed are the closeted, the underemployed, the unimpressive, the marginalized. Blessed are those who have to figure out new ways to hide the cuts adorning their arms. Blessed are those who walk through life with a mind working against them. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Not because they whine on soap boxes, but because they are driven by a passion for freedom and fairness. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones for whom life is hard. Blessed are those without documentation and without those willing to lobby on their behalf. Blessed are the foster kids and the non traditional families and the trophy kids and the kids receiving special education services. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the ones who have this inkling that there has to be more than this, for they are right.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Not because they forget, for there is no virtue in false piety, but because they know the freedom of forgiveness. They know what to change and what to accept for now. Blessed are the leaders who put people over profit. Blessed are the social workers and the teachers and the pro-bono lawyers. Blessed are the kids who stand up to bullies. Blessed are those who have forgiven me when I was completely unworthy. Blessed are the merciful for they totally get it.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Not because they act like angels, for there is no virtue in other worldliness, but because their life is transparent, and courageous in its authenticity. And there God is seen.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Not because they are passive, for there is no virtue in covering up violence and oppression for the sake of unity. Rather because they creatively seek solutions which challenge systems of domination.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven. Not because they suffer, for there is no virtue in humiliation, but because they know the freedom and inner strength of being consistent, bold and loving in their stances no matter what the cost.

You are not the first to suffer and you will not be the last. Who are we to throw in the towel. Know however that your suffering will not be in vain. There will be growth, and there will be creative gain. Know above all that love, justice and truth will win ultimately, that the kin-dom of heaven is seen wherever life and beauty are affirmed.

Sometimes it's hard to digest all of this blessing nonsense. Do you ever hear the disgusting sentiment that it's 'God's will' when it comes to suffering? Well I wondered, why don't we use this sentiment in a positive light? Why don't we ever make big cosmic claims about God controlling everything that happens when it comes to the way in which God insists on blessing that which the world deems undesirable?

I began to think about what our relationship to receiving and giving blessing might be if it's the giving of a blessing itself, and not the ability to meet the conditions of receiving a blessing that make the receiver blessed.

It's a pretty Lutheran idea, this whole because of/not in order to thing. You live lives worthy of the Gospel BECAUSE you have received grace upon grace. You don't live lives worthy of the gospel IN ORDER to receive this grace. It's a critical distinction, but for some of us, it can be easier to try to meet the conditions of receiving blessing than to simply receive one.

A while back, I spoke at an event in Hartford, and a woman of at least 70 bee lines toward me and embraces me. Not a friendly “thank you” hug, but it was like “embracing-with-the-intent-to-bless”

I had just read aloud an essay about my life; ridden with childhood trauma, internalized homophobia, and mental illness. And now before I knew what was happening some Anglican Australian lady is straight up blessing me. Red cardigan covered arms enfolded me as this stranger whispers in my ear. “God has given you something. Jesus walks with you.” She’s embracing me. ME. A heavily tattooed, heavily swearing, heavily sarcastic Lutheran. I felt completely unworthy, but it also felt like God’s own self was blessing me with a warm coffee breath and scratchy cardigan.

I sat back down and texted Bridget about what just happened. She responded almost instantly- “Babe, sometimes you just gotta let people bless you.” And (as usual), she’s right.

If we’re dealing with a God who blesses the poor, the hurting, the peace making, and the meek—then I wonder what a Church that submits to these blessings offered to us might look like. Perhaps you have your own red cardigan lady bringing you God’s blessings. Seek these people out and let them bless you. Because God is a God who blesses in order that that we might bless others.

Maybe Jesus blessed all we hide or try to overcompensate for because he saw it in himself. After all, Jesus had all the powers of the universe at his disposal- but did not consider his equality with his Creator as something to be exploited. He did quite the opposite and sought reconciliation. He cried at the tomb of his dear friend, he turned the other cheek, he forgave those who fed him sour wine and hung him on a cross. He was God’s living, breathing, witnessing Beatitude.

It’s like Jesus is saying, “you may despise your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire the strong and mighty, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may be obsessed with power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability.”

Hello. Most of you already know me, but my name is Katie. I'd like to reintroduce myself. I'm an elementary school teacher, a Christian activist, a lacrosse coach, and a nanny. I am a daughter, sister, granddaughter, cousin, aunt, friend, and child of God. I am also bisexual, and identify as genderqueer. My partner Bridget and I live in suburban Connecticut with our dog, cat, and guinea pigs.

Believe it or not , this is the first time I can finally say that aloud and not care who hears.. You may celebrate this one day of welcoming those like me and think it’s enough. But this is our life. Every day. Life is completely chaotic, but it’s equally beautiful, and I am extravagantly blessed. But this is obviously not the situation for everyone.

So, if you are here mourning, or feeling forsaken, abused, unseen, or no-longer-useful. If you are like me, aware that it is not the beautiful, shiny things that the world loves that qualify you to be called a child of God, but rather your need for a God who makes beautiful things out of dust, then this meal we are about to eat is for you. It’s a beatitude meal. It’s the broken, blessed, and freely given body of Christ. So, as you come, behold who you are. And as the blessings Jesus preached on the mount, know that it’s here that you become what you receive.

Amen.