

Readings: Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace...and blessing from God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Make believe with me just for a minute. Your phone rings. You answer it. “Ugh, hello pastor. Hmm? You’re going to be gone next week? ...and you need me to what?! ...you’d like for me to preach?”

Now before you turn-off your ‘make-believer’ for fear of public speaking, before you drift off into a dream (or a nightmare) where you’re standing in front of a full congregation in your underwear; just take a minute. Make believe that you couldn’t say no, that you agreed to reach and then ask yourself a question.

Where do you begin? With what word do you start? How do you proclaim the “good news of the kingdom” (as Matthew’s Gospel is fond of calling it); how do you proclaim “the kingdom of heaven come near”?

Well, “Blessed...” is the word Jesus uses to kick-off the first full sermon, the first public teaching in Matthew’s Gospel, which incidentally we hear not just today, but unfolding over the next four Sundays.

“So what?” you say. It’s a religious-enough sounding word. “What’s the big deal with the word ‘blessed’?” Well, the big deal is with a single word, Jesus steps into the middle of a conflict – a conflict which is so near and dear to the human heart that every religion eventually has to deal with it.

What’s the conflict? Well, bear with me, let’s put it as simply as possible, as a question. Is the path to God (if not, *the meaning of life*) about *enjoyment and taking pleasure and delight in all that’s around you*, living in the present moment? ...or is the path to God (if not, *the meaning of life*) about *refraining, abstaining from all that’s around you*, working towards a higher goal or something better?

It might be easier to start with the second path, the second way – probably because most of us who grew up “religious,” grew up in churches where *the path to God* was carved out by what you did not do. You do not dance or smoke or drink or play cards; that’s what it means to “be religious.”

And even the things you *do* on this ‘path’ (like going to church or praying or reading the Bible), you do more out of a sense of duty or responsibility than out of any sense of delight or enjoyment. Garrison Keillor has a fantastic name, that really captures this kind of church: *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility*.

Life is a ladder. Refrain and you climb one rung. Abstain and you climb another. Do your duty, take another step. Take responsibility, and slowly scale your way up to heaven, a life-long game of *Chutes & Ladders*.

You might laugh and think it’s “outdated,” but *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility* is as alive-and-well as always (and not just among Roman Catholic Churches). Look no further than the great religion of diet-planning or exercise gurus; turn to the church of self-help classes and you’ll know that there is something about this path that appeals to something deep inside us. Maybe it’s the structure, the order, the clear set of boundaries, right and wrong – but clearly (according to this way of thinking) life is to be *endured*.

But you also know the other path or at least you see strains of it plastered on your Facebook page, clogging your email inbox with forwards.

“Time is like a river,” says one, with an image of a hiker touching a pristine, sunset-lake, “you cannot touch the same water twice, because the flow that has passed will never pass again. Enjoy every moment of life...”¹

“Slow down and enjoy life,” agrees a second, over the top of an image of cars speeding by. “It’s not only the scenery you miss by going fast, you also miss the sense of where you are going and why.”²

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old,” proclaims a third, with an elderly couple dancing in the surf like two-year-olds. “We grow old because we stop playing.”³

You get the idea, right? And trust me, I don’t mean to make light of choosing this path any more than the first. I only mean to paint the picture in a modern way, the ancient setting in which Jesus preaches his first publicly recorded sermon.

¹ <http://rishikajain.com/2011/04/13/time-is-like-a-river-you-cannot-touch-the-same-water-twice-because-the-flow-that-has-passed-will-never-pass-again-enjoy-every-moment-of-life/>

² <http://inspiringshortstories.org/slow-down-and-enjoy-life/>

³ <http://ritmono.blogspot.com/2012/12/inspirational-life-quotes.html>

Perhaps it really was no different in those days than it is today, except maybe the general cultural pendulum happened to be swinging on the other side, but the conflict was the same. And it's in the middle of this epic conflict over the path to God, the meaning of life. Is life about *enduring* in "*Holy Abstinence*" or is life to be *enjoyed* in "*Blessed Participation*."⁴

And Jesus steps in front of this great gathered crowd, they've heard what he's been doing – healing, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom – and I imagine the assembly divided right down the middle with all the members of *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility* on one side and the *Church of Cheesy-Facebook-Inspirational-Sayings* on the other.

Actually, with most conflicts there's about one quarter of the people in one camp and another quarter of the people at the other end and about half of the people in the middle who are oblivious and could honestly care less. At any rate, Jesus stands up in front of the crowd and says, "Blessed..."

And I can just see the *Church of Cheesy-Facebook-Inspirational-Sayings* getting ready to let out a big cheer while all the folks from *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility* get ready to shout out defensively, "Hey! Wait just a minute!" All the while the middle half of the crowd is shushing the two sides saying, "Shhhh! We wanna hear what he has to say!"

But before any of that can even happen, Jesus finishes the second half of the sentence: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And the *Church of Cheesy-Facebook-Inspirational-Sayings* goes from the thrill of excitement to "Hey! Wait a minute!" and *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility* goes from "Hey! Wait a minute!" to getting ready to let out a big cheer while the middle half of the crowd keeps shushing both sides, "Shush it! We wanna hear what he has to say!"

And this all happens in about one and a half seconds. But it keeps happening back-and-forth... Jesus starts with the word "Blessed" – a rallying cry for the 'Blessed Participation' camp where life is a delight, but Jesus goes on to say who is blessed and the people who are blessed are people suffering, slipping, falling behind in the cosmic game of *Chutes & Ladders*. It doesn't make any sense in the framework of the epic conflict.

⁴ Ron Miller in his Introduction to *The Sacred Writings of Paul – Annotated & Explained* (Skylight Paths Publishing; Vermont, 2007), pages xii-xiv.

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. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

And for a moment, the epic conflict is silent. There is a holy silence that's both an abstaining from... as well as a delighting in...

Brothers and sisters, God indeed offers blessings in abundance and begs us to take delight in them – a playful smile of a friend, the wafting of fresh-baked bread, holding hands with the love of one's life, voices joined in prayer that *sings*, hands joined together around a table where God's goodness and blessing are not just on display, but lifted up for all to enjoy.

And (not *but, and...*) life is not just *eat, drink and be merry*. What's a friend's playful smile or even the touch of a loved one if you haven't forgiven, haven't abstained, haven't done the hard work of *letting go* the trespass? What's the smell of bread if you're satiated with junk food? Why do you gather here week after week if not to lose yourself in a gathering of prayer that sings and joins together for a meal so meager it fills not just your stomach, but your very soul.

“I have blessed you,” God tells Abraham, “so that you may be a blessing.” “What does the Lord require of you?” asks the prophet Micah, “but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” “When you see a fork in the road,” said Yogi Berra, “take it.”

In other words, maybe it's not about the path you take to God, but the path God takes to you. If you find yourself on the path with things to enjoy, enjoy them! If you find yourself on the path with things to endure, endure them! But whether you enjoy or you endure, know that God delights to walk on the path in front of you, beside you, behind you. Blessing you all the way. And that's a sermon that you can preach whenever and wherever you're called to... using words (as they say), if necessary. Amen.