

Epistle Reading – Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 NRSV

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'

So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, You are a God of hospitality; there is none like you that invites all to come to you. You have invited all to your home, to your table, and to your arms. Lord, would that all would hear and receive this good news. Lord, help us to remember that no one is better than anyone else in your Kingdom.

Help us to then treat each other the way you treat people.

Generous God, Because you treat us with your tender love, We take time to pray for our friends, family members and others who need you more than ever. Pour out your healing on all who need it. Be generous with your transforming love for those who needs it in their lives. Bring forth your reconciliation in families, and in places where it is needed.

Giftng God, You give us the gifts of the spirit to use to further your Kingdom and to be the Body of Christ in the world. We take time to remember the people

devastated by Hurricane Katrina [*substitute any other more recent situation or disaster*] and to thank you for the restoration that has already taken place. Empower us to continue to be your hands and feet to continue the work that needs to be done there and in so many other places. There is none like you God in your love, your generosity, your gifting and your hospitality. And we thank you that you are in our lives, working in us and through us to let people know your kingdom is open to all. In the name of your Son, who opened the doors for all and broke down barriers that kept people from you, Amen.

Hymn ***Brothers and Sisters of Mine*** **142**

Gospel Reading **Luke 14:1, 7-14 NRSV**

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.

‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;

and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Message “Blessed”

Rev. Glenn Brumbaugh

Blessed is a pretty familiar term to most of us, especially those who have spent any time studying scripture. The concept of being blessed, or receiving blessing is found throughout both testaments of the Christian bible. When we hear that word, it probably conjures in our minds positive connotations. In our daily lives, when we think of someone who is blessed,

they are generally those who have encountered good fortune, such as a new, healthy child, good health, success, or many other qualities we associate with being fortunate.

In the Old Testament, there is a strong undercurrent throughout that if one is righteous and ethical, one will acquire special favor from God, and will reap the benefits imagined from such a privileged relationship. Throughout Christian theological history that has been a major theme as well. If one is living right, one will be rewarded not only in this lifetime, but the next. The “prosperity gospel” popular today builds on this theme. And conversely, if things are going poorly for you, or for your society, you must be doing something wrong, and you need to correct your course to turn things around. Yet is that always the case? I'm sure we all know good people who seem to suffer needlessly. We've all pondered why bad things happen to good people? The bible shares with us similar stories exemplifying this quandary, a prime example being the book of Job. So what does being blessed really mean then? Jesus sheds some light on this topic in the form of two banquet metaphors.

To understand where he is coming from, it's helpful to understand the structure of Palestinian formal gatherings, particularly wedding banquets, which have largely remained the same throughout the years until the present. At these gatherings, the men all recline on couches spread around the room. The couch in the middle of the room is the most prestigious, and the most revered and honored would occupy that position, and then the couches expanding from that would be filled in descending order of importance fanning outwards. If one should arrive and rightfully take the most honored position, then someone of greater importance arrives, the expectation would be that you would relocate and make that space available for the newcomer. That's the background his audience would have approached these stories with.

Jesus tells the crowd it is more advantageous to take a lesser seat at the start, then if no one more important arrives, you would be blessed by being asked to move to a more prestigious location. Clearly makes sense from a straightforward interpretation, but what if we think about it a little more in depth. It makes a contrast between the expectation of blessing of those who presume to automatically take the privileged position with those who, in humility, take a lesser position.

If the banquet itself is a metaphor for the kin-dom of God, then clearly those who are humble have preference. This outlook also conflicts with the viewpoint of many in our culture today. We lift up and revere those captains of industry who have excelled and accumulated great wealth and power, as well as those celebrities who seem to live charmed lives. Many dream of acquiring that winning Powerball or Megamillions ticket that will give them instant wealth to live such a life of luxury. Young people yearn to be an “influencer:” to acquire millions of followers, get “certified,” and get all the accolades and financial surplus that often includes. But is that really being blessed?

The second vignette Jesus shares continues to illustrate what being blessed really means. He tells the host that instead of inviting friends and social equals to the banquet, he should

instead invite the outcasts and “less thans,” those who cannot possibly repay the honor in kind. If you only invite those who will reciprocate, then you have not truly earned a mitzvah, which is a concept that is very important in Judaism. A mitzvah is an expectation that you will regularly perform selfless acts of kindness out of heartfelt sentiment in order to fulfill the laws of the Old Testament in a very real way, such as “love your neighbor as yourself.” Devout Jews take this expectation very seriously. When you give something that will be repaid in kind, you have denied yourself and the other party the opportunity to partake in a mitzvah. Whereas if you do something for someone who can not repay you, you have earned a mitzvah and blessed them with kindness and shalom at the same time. From this perspective, maybe being blessed is more about being a blessing to others.

What would it look like if we defined our blessedness as how much we have blessed others in our thoughts and actions? Instead of looking for what rewards we can earn, we focus on how we can reward others. Too often in modern Christianity, the focus has become all about personal salvation and piety that we have lost our perspective on serving others. This passage always brings to mind a love feast for me. The act of humbly doing one of the most menial tasks of washing another's feet is the perfect illustration of what it means to approach in humility, seeking to bless another.

Social historian Robert Roberts writes about a fourth grade class in which the teacher introduced a game called "balloon stomp." A balloon was tied to every child's leg, and the object of the game was to pop everyone else's balloon while protecting one's own. The last person with an intact balloon would win. The fourth graders in Roberts' story entered into the spirit of the game with vigor. Balloons were relentlessly targeted and destroyed. A few of the children clung to the sidelines like wallflowers at a middle school dance, but their balloons were doomed just the same. The entire battle was over in a matter of seconds, leaving only one balloon inflated. Its owner was, of course, the most disliked kid in the class. It's hard to really win at a game like balloon stomp. In order to complete your mission, you have to be pushy, rude and offensive. Roberts goes on to write that a second class was introduced to the same game. Only this time it was a class of mentally handicapped children. They were given the same explanation as the first class, and the signal to begin was given. But the game proceeded very differently. Perhaps the instructions were given too quickly for children with learning disabilities to grasp them. The one idea that got through was that the balloons were supposed to be popped. So it was the balloons, not the other players, that were viewed as enemies. Instead of fighting each other, they began helping each other pop balloons. One little girl knelt down and held her balloon carefully in place, like a holder for a field goal kicker. A little boy stomped it flat. Then he knelt down and held his balloon for her. It went on like this for several minutes until all the balloons were vanquished, and everybody cheered. Everybody won. Who got the game right, and who got the game wrong? In our world, we tend to think of another person's success as one less opportunity for us to succeed. There can only be one top dog, one top banana, one big kahuna. If we ever find ourselves in that enviable position, many will fight like mad to

maintain our hold on it. A lot of companies fail to enjoy prolonged success because the people in charge have this "balloon stomp" mentality.

In the church, the rules change. Jesus Christ gets top billing. We're just here to serve his purposes, and we do that most effectively by elevating others and humbling ourselves. How do you define blessed and is it really just about you? I hope and pray that we all take a look at how we view being blessed, and work to be the blessing we are called to be to all we encounter, not only in our individual lives, but as Christ's body in our community and world, so we may be truly blessed. Amen.

A Call to Serve

We are invited to offer our resources, our time, our abilities, our compassion, on days when our lives are full and days when our lives feel empty. We are invited to offer what we have and accept what we need. Our practice sharing what we have through our gifts and talents, as well as the offering plate is a profound "yes" to the invitation of God.

A Time for Reflection – Musical Interlude

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

O God, you invite us to participate in a hospitality which is something else!
Help us not only to accept it with thanksgiving, but to freely share it with those whose lives are restricted or crushed by the meanness of this world. Make us not only receivers but generous and unpretentious givers. To the glory of your name, through Christ Jesus. Amen!

Hymn ***Will You Let Me Be Your Servant*** **307**

BENEDICTION

It's time to go. **Time to re-engage with the secular world.**

Time to put the faith into deeds. **Time to practice uncalculating love.**

Time to meet the Christ who waits for you. **Time to share his boundless hope.**

You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

With the blessing of God, in your mind and heart, let each morning be a joy to you, each path be a joy to you, each neighbour be a joy to you. Now and always..

Amen!

Postlude