

The Blessedness of Faith

February 2, 2020

First in a Series of Four, “Faith Cometh by Hearing”

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 1 of 4

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today we begin a four part series of sermons on the nature and benefits of Christian faith. This sermon series will take us to the end of the Epiphany season, culminating with Transfiguration Sunday, and to the beginning of the Lenten season. Next Sunday, we focus on Living in Faith, the following Sunday Growing in Faith, and the Sunday after that, Mountain Top Faith. Today the Blessedness of Faith.

The writer to the Hebrews defines Christian faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Paul writes to the Romans that Christian faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. The Psalmist says that a man or woman of faith is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Luther reminds us that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in the Lord Jesus or come to Him, but that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who creates and strengthens this gift of faith in our hearts and minds through the preaching and teaching and remembering of God's Word, as well as in the waters of Baptism and the bread and the wine, the very body and blood of Christ in His Supper.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is elaborating on the simple truth that blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it, treasure it, hold onto it in their hearts. He is preaching primarily to disciples in these Beatitudes, which form the beginning of the most famous sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount. In these Blessed are They statements, Jesus is not telling us how to become blessed, He is describing the blessedness that already belongs to Christians here and now.

In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Micah described the evidence of faith in three brief phrases, it is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. In today's Epistle Lesson, Paul directs us to the cross where Christ was crucified for us as the source and the object of our faith. And now in our Gospel lesson, Jesus would declare his disciples blessed because of what he himself had earned for them by living, suffering, dying, and rising up again on their behalf. He was not making ethical demands of his followers but rather describing a blessedness they would fully enjoy in heaven, blessings they could also enjoy by faith here and now. The first four beatitudes invite us to think about what it means to be children of a heavenly father, and the next three ask us to reflect on what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ten fill in the blank opportunities today, ten blessed facts, ten little snapshots as Jesus describes for us up and close and personal how beautiful life already is for God's people and how perfectly beautiful it's going to be in heaven.

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Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 2 of 4

Snapshot #1 is that Blessed are they who know their cup is refillable. On the one hand, we all know folks who are the pessimists - they are often moaning and groaning about how their cup is almost empty and the sky is going to fall any day now. On the other hand, we know the eternal optimists - the folks who have on rose colored glasses, their cup is running over, and everything is going to be ok. Jesus would point us to the middle ground, if you will, your cup is refillable, daily you are invited to cry out for help knowing that help has already arrived in the Person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Snapshot #2 is that blessed are they who enjoy what their Father is giving. That's another way of saying "*blessed are the poor in spirit, the beggarly in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*" Jesus pictures the Christian here as a cringing and crouching and wretched kind of a guy who brings nothing at all to the plate. The attitude of a beggar is like that of a child who recognizes that all he possesses comes from his parents. It's like that of an overwhelmed single mom who cries out "I can't do this anymore," and as soon as she cries out, it's as if the heaviest of burdens has been lifted from her shoulder. Dear friends in Christ, the very first question in our Catechism makes this point - that Christianity at its center is simply receiving the gifts our Father in heaven is wanting to give us - gifts of forgiveness and all of the life and salvation that come along with it.

Snapshot #3 is that blessed are they who possess the riches of the future already here and now. Christians have the advantage of living our our stories knowing that the ending is happy. We build our little mansions here on earth knowing that what Jesus says is most certainly true, "In my father's house are many mansions." We sin daily and fall short every single day knowing that Jesus Christ didn't fall short. We go through the ups and downs of life knowing that Christ gave up the riches of heaven and came down to accept the poverty of a Bethlehem manger, he accepted the obscurity of a childhood in Nazareth, he accepted the total humiliation of death by crucifixion on a little hill outside of Jerusalem. And because all of that is true, we go free, we live by faith, and already here and now, the riches of God's grace are ours.

Snapshot # 4 is that blessed are they who wear robes that keep on losing their stains. That's another way of saying that *blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted*. The word for mourn here indicates a loud crying out, as in lamenting for the dead or for a severe and painful loss. We think not only of being sorry for our own sins, but all the grief and sorrow due to the power of sin in this world. We have good reason to cry out for mercy not only as individuals, but in our marriages and families, to cry out for mercy as a congregation, to cry out for mercy upon our city, our state, our nation, even our world. Jesus said it this way in Revelation 22, *blessed are they who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb*. As often as we sincerely confess, as often as we are still

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Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 3 of 4

before Almighty God and acknowledge our guilt, as often as we step forward to our Lord's Supper with contrite hearts, that often, our stained, spotted, and soiled robes are made white as snow.

Snapshot #5 is that blessed are they who enjoy an inheritance fought for and earned by another. That's another way of saying *blessed are the meek, for just they shall inherit the earth*. My sisters and I have experienced what a number of you have gone through. Our parents approached death, and they in fact passed away. Within a few weeks of their passing, we began to receive checks in the mail. It was a humbling thing to know that my dad and his dad had lost their farm to the depression and in 1939, they started over. For 35 plus years my parents toiled and they scrimped and they saved and they paid their bills. And as soon as they laid down and breathed their last, my sisters and I began to enjoy an inheritance fought for and earned by another. So also with everyone of us as the people of God. We enjoy an inheritance made possible by the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are the privileged and the blessed people of God, and today the words of Jesus should ring loud in our ears, "I came that you might have life and that you might have life abundantly."

Snapshot #6 is that blessed are they who are satisfied one day at a time. That's another way of saying *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*. We think here of the 4th Petition where we ask God to give us this day our daily bread. Why do we pray this way? Luther answers, that we might learn that God is the giver and that we would receive it with thanksgiving. In terms of physical eating and drinking, we know that the more hungry we are, the better a sandwich will taste. The more thirsty we are, the more we appreciate a glass of water. So also in terms of our soul, the more the Law has done its dirty work in our hearts, the sweeter the Gospel sounds. How beautiful it is to know that on the one hand, the sins of our past have been forgiven, and on the other hand, the worries of our future are in the hands of God, leaving us with just today, to live and to move and to breathe and to be satisfied one day at a time.

Snapshot #7 is that blessed are they who look out for their siblings just for the fun of it. The first four Beatitudes look towards God, the next three towards other people in our lives. Mercy and pure hearts and peace making are three virtues which mark Christians as blessed. With God, his grace towards us is first, and then our grace for one another is second. First He is merciful towards us, and secondly, we show mercy to our brothers and sisters in Christ, not only out of a sense of duty, but also in a spirit of thanksgiving. This past week, my sister Gail and I figured out that our sister Judy and husband Kirk have been in China for a week or so, in these days of coronavirus outbreak is a scary thing. Gail and I are putting out the call far and wide for prayers for our sibling in danger, not just out of a sense of duty, but because we deeply care.

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Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 4 of 4

Snapshot #8 is that blessed are they who live with a "get to" attitude instead of a have to attitude. That's another way of saying what Jesus said, *blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*. Part of the blessedness of Christian faith is that as we grow in faith towards God, we at the same time grow in love for our neighbors. Less and less do we think to ourselves, "I have to go to work and I have to pay my bills and I have to be nice to my loved ones." More and more we think "I get to go to work and I get to pay my bills and it's a privilege to provide for my family." Less and less a spirit of victimhood and more and more a spirit of gratitude. Less and less woe is me and more and more blessed am I!

Snapshot #9 is that blessed are they who find that their human agenda has given way to a heavenly vision. Or as Jesus said it, *"blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* This past Tuesday and Wednesday, I visited three of our members who were in serious decline. First Tim, age 65 and then Bob age 83 and then Marion age 90. In all three cases I shared Scripture and prayer, in Tim's case, I sang What a Friend We Have in Jesus, and in Bob and Marion's case, I invited them to receive their Lord's Supper. In all three cases, their eyes were on Jesus, the author and the finisher of their faith. None of them seemed to care about their 401 k pension plans nor their retirement benefits nor the news of the day. Their human agendas had already given way to a heavenly vision.

Snapshots #10 is that blessed are they who find their pettiness giving way to a sweet peace Or as Jesus declared, *blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*. The ultimate peacemaker of course is Jesus Christ crucified, risen, ascended, ruling all of heaven and earth, and coming again. The word of his cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Dear friends in Christ, here at ST. Paul Lutheran and out and about beyond these walls, we learn one more time today, in response to Christ who is our peace, as St. Paul said it to the Romans, *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks increasingly aware of how on the one hand how blessed they are in Christ and how on the other hand, how troubled is the world in which they live. At the same time they rest in God's grace and are restless as they see all the work there is to do in the world around them. At the same time they receive the grace God is pleased to give and they are wondering how to bend that grace out into the lives of other people. In Jesus' Name. Amen.