

... You are Blessed

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
January 26, 2020
Matthew 5:1–12

Nadia Bolz-Weber, writer, pastor, speaker sat down and began to teach the afternoon the crowd gathered on her recent tour for her book, *Shameless*. She said,

Blessed are the agnostics.

Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

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 they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.

Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."

Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms.

Blessed are the meek.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

Nadia Bolz-Weber continued: I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us all because I believe that's his nature. Because, after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but did not consider his equality with God something to be

exploited. Instead, he came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn.

As if to say, “You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability.” This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross. Because he was God’s Beatitude—God’s blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.”¹

It’s a weird way to start a speaking engagement with a list that may or may not have anything to do with the people gathered in the space where you’re speaking. But it certainly sets the tone, doesn’t it?

It grabs the listeners’ attention and those gathered quickly find a place. All of a sudden blessedness is assigned in a place where the world at large saw none.

I guess it’s an effective preaching technique because that’s exactly what Jesus did as he sat down and began the most famous sermon ever preached, one we’re still mulling over in 2020.

We heard the Sermon on the Mount in full last week all throughout our worship service. We read all of it, every verse in Matthew 5-7, the good, the bad, the questionable. If you’d like to listen to it in full in the collection of voices of our church, it’s edited and up on the website thanks to Steve Gallo. There are so many phrases, words that we quote in our culture at large and we have little awareness that they all came from this sermon by Jesus as he sat up on a hill, looking at the faces of the ones he called beloved.

Jesus’ most famous sermon holds a great deal of tension--between ethical living in the days that his original hearers were hearing it-- and the world that God dreams could be.

This sermon was Jesus’ announcement about who he was in the Gospel of Matthew. It was his first big speech after his baptism, it was after he called the disciples. It was his greatest hits.

The sermon on the mount as a whole is a grand announcement of what the Beloved Community—the community that follows God through Jesus might look like on earth if we lived it out.

These Beatitudes that Jesus first spoke all those years ago are no exception. We read the three versions in case one resonated more with you than another!

Imagine if every speech or every sermon began with the view of people’s inherent blessedness and worth. If we heard from preachers, politicians, businesspeople, teachers, how everyone should be lifted up instead of held down.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *A Benediction*.

Imagine how that would sound! Imagine what churches might look like and the state of the church in the world if we were lavishly pronouncing blessings instead of judgments.

This list of blessing-identities that Jesus first said has been domesticated because we've cross-stitched and meme-d the original words so much that it's hard to hear them outside of how we hear them. We dissect who's poor and who's merciful and who counts as a peacemaker. We've parsed them so much that it's nearly impossible to to hear the radical blessed-ness in them.

Jesus began his sermon with announcing who was valued—a smart move for anyone working to build a movement. And his announcement was that, everyone was. Every single person there was beloved. The alternate way of life was for every single person. Because those first hearers were blessed in an entirely new way that is more expansive than they could have imagined. But Jesus was inviting them to imagine.

He invites us too to imagine. What could be if we choose to value people in the kingdom of God way and not in the capitalistic-you're worth what you produce for me-way. That's how Nadia Bolz-Weber updated the list of blessings she wrote. Because those are speaking to us now.

If we were to imagine what it means to live life together in community, we'd probably end up with different ideas around here, but if I was a betting woman, I'd bet that they'd fall under three headings:

1. Sharing love
2. Doing Justice, and
3. Building Community

As it turns out, it's stewardship season around here at Ravensworth. I said it. I said the "S" word. The "S" word, or Stewardship is season in our life together when we dream big together, when we imagine what it means to live out that calling of life together in community.

During this season, we talk about how we each give of our time with the ways we serve the church in volunteer positions. That's stewardship.

At the business meeting today, we'll hear from the Nominating Committee about the positions we have on our organizational chart and all of you who are filling them! They'll ask us some questions about the way we best organize ourselves and serve together in ways that are nimble and responsive.

On February 2, we'll hear from missions about our partners around the world and the ways we support each other in relationship. That's stewardship. On February 9, we'll ordain deacons, the ones among us who have been called to serve in the church in this way. That's stewardship.

On February 9, we'll also talk about what it means to make a financial pledge to this place as we live out our calling here. It takes money to do what we do here, but it's beyond

money, it's us committing to listen to what the Spirit is inviting us to do. We all serve and give differently. That's stewardship!

This is a holistic view of stewardship. It's our life together in conversation. And it's exciting. We're working to live out that dream of God that Jesus shared about in the Sermon on the Mount.

What if we determined our church volunteer positions based on our dreams together with Holy Spirit of who needs to be valued and lifted up right now? What if our budget shifted toward the places, we see the deepest need right now?

I know...it's a lot to put into practice. That's stewardship!

I'll be honest and tell you I just copied Jesus in the way I preached this sermon today. I figured he knows a thing or two about the flow of a sermon. Start with the blessings and move into the stuff that's a little tougher to discuss about life together and how we live it out.

Nadia Bolz-Weber finished up her talk saying, "Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus' lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside who his world—like ours—didn't seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.

Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn't otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards. I mean, come on, *doesn't* that just sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?"²

Sounds just like Jesus to throw around blessings.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Ibid.