

Come, You Who Are Blessed

Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Matthew 25:31-46

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I am going to keep my words brief this morning. There are two reasons for this.

First, the sickness that was beginning to descend upon me last Sunday has been my companion ever since, including a trip out to speak at RJC.

I somehow made it through that trip thanks to the sustaining presence of the Spirit (and a lot of Advil), but once I got home the worst of it came. I think (hope?) I am beginning to emerge out of it, but I have had little time or energy for sermon prep this week! You'll still probably want to avoid me after the service if you don't want to get sick. 😊

Second, we have already heard the message of peace and the theme of welcoming the stranger as an expression of the peace we long for already this morning in various ways—through the two Scripture readings, through the story Ruth shared at the beginning of the service, through the children's story, and through the songs.

So, I have only a few words for you this morning. I hope and pray that they will be good ones.

As Ruth mentioned earlier, this is a day where I, too, often feel conflicted. I am convinced that those who follow Jesus must be people committed to peace.

But I am hesitant to just get up here and use this day as an opportunity to trumpet the Mennonite "brand." *We're the denomination that proclaims peace! We're the denomination that is against war.*

The older I get and the longer I preach, the more I think that what the world needs is not so much grand pronouncements from the church about "issues" but actual human *lives* that are being transformed into the image of Christ and being a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom.

This is what I told the students at RJC this week. They were wrestling with big issues having to do with war and peace and how to deal with difficult passages in the bible and violence of all kinds. These things are all important, I said, and they deserve your best thinking and action.

But peacemaking starts within.

It's fine and good to call yourself a pacifist, but if you can't be agents of peace in your families, in your schools, in your relationships, in how you conduct yourself online, in the everyday domains in which God has placed you, then you will fall short of what you were created to be and to do in the world.

I want to remind us of the same thing this morning. Peace always starts close to home.

In my earlier years of pastoral ministry, I had a bit of a pet peeve. It had to do with how the word "blessed" or "blessings" was used in churchy circles.

It would mildly irritate me when people would tell me to have a "blessed" day or would sign off their emails with "blessings" instead "best wishes" or "sincerely" or "all the best" or one of the many other phrases we use to close off conversations.

How could I have a "blessed" day? Blessings are, by definition, outside of my control, right? God either dispenses them or he doesn't.

The word "blessings," for me, pointed to the bestowing of a gift. They came from the outside. What sense did it make, I thought, to wish someone a "blessed" day?

Matthew 25:34 begins thus:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "**Come, you who are blessed** by my Father...

We know what follows this, right. "The blessed" are welcomed into the kingdom prepared since the creation of the world for a whole bunch of things they *did*.

They fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty.

They clothed the naked.

They looked after the sick.

They visited the prisoner.

They welcomed the stranger.

And in doing all these things, they welcomed God himself, who identifies himself with the broken, the needy, and the vulnerable.

The “blessed” didn’t do these things to *receive* a blessing—this is clear because they were surprised to hear the King identify so personally with those they served.

They did it, apparently, because they were able to enter into the lived experience of a neighbour in need.

So, the “blessed” identify with the “least of these.” They are able to see beyond themselves and to imaginatively enter the experience of those in need.

In Deuteronomy, the people of Israel were constantly reminded that “blessing” was tied to obedience.

Things would go well for Israel when they reflected the character of their God, who is impartial and who seeks justice for all.

Blessing was also tied to their ability to *remember* correctly:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The people of Israel were commanded to welcome the stranger because they remember what it was like to *be* a stranger.

They remembered what it was like to be oppressed, to be under threat, to be misunderstood and despised, to not have a home. They remembered what it was like to be unwanted.

These are the ones whose hearts are willing to make room.

So, it turns out, we *can* do something to locate ourselves in the category of “blessed.”

We can extend ourselves to “least of these.” And here, again, it’s important not to think of some abstract category of needy people but of the people in our everyday lives who are lonely, who are awkward, who are poor and vulnerable, who maybe don’t fit in, who can’t get their act together...

And we can seek to develop the heart of a stranger in how we remember. We can be willing to make room for those the world seems not to want to make room for.

These things decide whether or not we are among the “blessed” that are welcomed into the kingdom.

So it turns out that it does make sense to wish someone a “blessed” day.

It means to wish them a day where they are consciously locating themselves in the peaceable kingdom.

It means to wish them a day where they self-consciously make room for the other (and we must remember that at the root of so much violence, whether global or interpersonal is a refusal to make room).

It means to wish them a day where they imaginatively enter into the experience of other people

And I don’t want us to hear all of this as a burdensome set of “to-do’s for Jesus.”

We do this very easily, in my experience. We hear texts like this and look at our own lives and think, “Oh man, I’m not sure I’m doing enough to welcome the stranger....”

On one level, this is an appropriate response. Jesus’ words about judgment are meant to jolt us into evaluating how and where we are locating ourselves in the world.

But we are not meant to live in fear of an angry God who’s keeping score of how many people we feed and clothe, how many strangers we welcome, etc.

We are meant to be participants in a story of love that reaches into the deepest, darkest places of the world.

It was love, not fear, which drove Jesus into these places while he lived on earth. The same ought to be true for us.

God is love and as we read in 1 John 4:18,

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

One thing I am convinced of is this: **We cannot love the way that Jesus loves, we cannot love the people that Jesus loves, we cannot locate ourselves in the places that Jesus located himself unless we actually *love Jesus*.**

It sounds so obvious, doesn’t it?

But, unless we are drawn by Jesus and his way of being in the world, we will not seek to emulate him.

Unless we have been taken hold of by the love that overcomes the darkness and fear of death, the peace that passes understanding, we will not seek to demonstrate this love and peace ourselves.

Unless we love Jesus we will not love *like* Jesus.

The good news of the gospel of peace was never meant to be a moral checklist to grudgingly perform. It is meant, rather, to be good news!

And we were meant to joyfully response to the goodness and mercy of God that we have been shown by extending ourselves into the places where God has blazed a trail.

So, on this Peace Sunday, 2018, I wish each and every one of you a “blessed” day.

Live the kind of lives that God blesses. Seek God where he is to be found.

Come, you who are blessed! Be peacemakers not just with grand pronouncements about war and peace but perhaps more importantly with simple actions of love, mercy, and welcome.

This is how the kingdom comes. And this is where the King is to be found.

Amen.

