

**Called to bless
Matthew 5:1-12**

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When was the last time someone blessed you? The last time someone looked at you and said 'Bless you'. Let's do it right now. Turn to the person next to you or in front or behind. Look at them and say Bless you. Now find someone else and if you see someone not near anyone, go over to them and say Bless you. How did it feel to be blessed? How did it feel to bless someone else? Blessing is powerful. It changes the receiver and the giver.

Our gospel is about blessing. It may be familiar to many of you – often called the beatitudes. It is a series of blessings.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

I have often struggled with these blessings because I wondered if it meant that only the poor, those who mourn and the pure in heart would be blessed. This week I read a reflection that pointed out something very interesting about the beatitudes. The first 8 are not written to us. They don't say blessed are you. They say blessed are those. It is only the last one that uses you – Blessed are you when people revile you and say all sorts of things against you. The beatitudes are Jesus' teaching – teaching that those who are poor and who mourn have a special place in God's heart and God's kingdom. Jesus' is teaching us that those people are blessed. It is not that we aren't blessed. Jesus is turning our eyes to those people. We are invited to be part of the blessing. Our work is to bless others. It goes beyond saying bless you. The blessing also happens in our actions.

It is our annual meeting Sunday and what I usually do is give my report for the year as part of the sermon. As I thought about all that happens here at St. Peter's, I wondered if we can see all that we do as the work of blessing. If you read through this annual report, you will see that there is a lot of blessing going on. Those who prepare for worship and then help make it happen from the Altar Guild, to the choir, to the readers, the ushers, the healers, the Eucharistic ministers to the Sunday School teachers to the staff are all doing the work of blessing. When you come and join in the worship, you too are part of the work of blessing. Think about the blessing that our food pantry does, our community garden, our other outreach ministries, the mother's guild, the buildings and

grounds committee, the vestry, the parish life council, the Way of St Paul team. All these groups are engaged in blessing in one way or another.

I want to highlight one of our new ministries by which I feel especially blessed, and that is Chili Church – a ministry created by our way of St. Paul team. It happens on the first Thursday of every month. We begin with prayer. We eat chili or soup or whatever is offered. We read and discuss the gospel and then we pray some more. It is a time of worship, fellowship and study in a more informal atmosphere than church. As someone said at our last Way of St. Paul Meeting – Chili Church is something I could invite my friends to much more easily since it is less intimidating than having them come to church which can be overwhelming. We've seen that Chili Church has helped our newcomers feel more at home. We've seen long time parishioners engage in a different way.

We have other new ministries which are doing their work of blessing. There are the ministry and witness minutes which happen once a month where our members share why a ministry is important to them or witness to their faith. We've added another opportunity to our children to learn with Celebrating the Seasons – a day long, Vacation Bible School style of learning for each of our church seasons. We've started a regular bible study on the Acts of the Apostles and introduced Sacristans to help with our worship. We are experimenting with online faith reflection using Facebook.

Now you might say well – how much blessing can we be doing? Our church isn't filled up like it used to be in the 70's and '80s. Are we really changing lives? Are we helping others follow in Jesus' ways? I say yes - just not in the way we have come to expect. Our world changes pretty fast these days and church is not a priority in many people's lives, but this doesn't mean people do not want to make a difference in the world. I've been reading a book called Missional Renaissance which describe the rise of altruism- the practice of giving and working to help others. The welfare of others is very important to the generation coming up. They want to make a difference with their actions and their money. Charitable giving now comes to around \$300 billion a year and is rising.¹

I saw this at Christmas when we as a parish could not handle the number of gift tags on our Giving Tree which is how we provide gifts for the children of the families who use our pantries. I put it on Facebook and in a few days we went from 50 extra tags to maybe 2. The yacht club got involved through Facebook and now wants to be a regular participant. Most of those people didn't come to church on Christmas Eve, but they were part of our work of blessing.

Our way of blessing is no longer only about bringing people to St. Peter's and having them take their place among us as members of our community. Our way of blessing means going out and blessing others and inviting them to become part of blessing as

¹ McNeal, Reggie (2009-01-16). Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series) (p. 4). Wiley. Kindle Edition

well. People will join us, but some or many will not be traditional church members. They will work alongside us as we strive to bless the world. What does that mean for our church? I don't have a crystal ball. It will most likely mean we will have to evolve and be innovative as we try to live into new ways of being a community of Christ that doesn't focus solely on gathering here. But if we focus on being people who go out and bless the world, then we will be part of God's mission and if we keep that first, the rest will become clear.

This week, ask yourself – what other ways can St. Peter's continue to be a place which is a blessing and that sends people out to bless? In what ways can I be a blessing? This world needs us especially now as our country seems to be heading in directions we never expected. Jesus needs each and every one of us to go out and to bless and be a blessing in this world.