

Sermon for January 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed. We heard that word a lot in our Gospel reading today. And I began to wonder just what being blessed means because the words equated with being blessed in our reading aren't what we usually associate with how we interpret blessings. In today's society those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are persecuted and reviled aren't the ones who come to mind when we hear the word blessed.

In fact when we hear that word we tend to think of people like the Kennedys, the Rockefellers, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet. We think of people who have many and big houses, expensive cars, private jets, and seem to want for nothing. So what does blessed mean?

In ancient Greek times the word for blessed referred to the gods. The blessed ones were the gods. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment in life that was beyond all cares, labors and even problems and worries of ordinary people. To be blessed, you had to be a god.

Blessed took on a second meaning when it referred to the dead. The blessed ones were humans, who, through death, had reached the other world of the gods. They were now beyond the cares and problems and worries of earthly life. To be blessed, you had to be dead. That is the origin of the different saints days—they are remembered on the dates of their deaths. All Saints Day was for all the people who had died in the faith whose names we didn't know.

Finally, in Greek usage, blessed came to refer to the elite, the upper crust of society, the wealthy people. It referred to people whose riches and power put them above the normal cares and problems and worries of the lesser folk—the peons, who constantly struggle and worry and labor in life. To be blessed, you had to be very rich and powerful.

When the word blessed was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it took on another meaning. It referred to the results of right living or righteousness. If you lived right, you

were blessed. Being blessed meant you received earthly, material things: a good wife, many children, abundant crops, riches, honor, wisdom, beauty, good health, and so on. A blessed person had more things and better things than an ordinary person. To be blessed you had to have big and beautiful things.

We see this type of thinking in the book of Job where when Job has many children and possessions he is seen as being blessed by God. When Job loses everything; his friends keep asking him what he did wrong to become cursed by God and lose God's blessing. We also see this way of thinking in a healing story in John's gospel where Jesus heals a blind man. His disciples ask Jesus who had sinned—this man or his parents—that he had been born blind and without blessings.

When we look at all these meanings, the "blessed" ones lived in a higher plane than the rest of us. They were gods. They were humans who had gone to the world of the gods. They were the wealthy, upper crust. They were those with many possessions. The blessed were those people and beings who lived above the everyday cares, problems and worries of normal people.

Matthew, who reflects Jesus' thoughts, uses this word in a totally different way. It is not the elite who are blessed. It is not the rich and powerful who are blessed. It is not the high and mighty who are blessed. It is not the people living in huge mansions or expensive penthouses who are blessed. Rather, Jesus pronounces God's blessings on the lowly: the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the meek, the mourning.

The poor in spirit are people who have no reason for hope in this world and are characterized as the true people of God, those who know their lives are not in their own control and that they are dependent on God. Those who mourn are the ones who find no cause for joy. They lament the present condition of God's people and the fact that God's will is not yet done. The meek are the ones who have been denied access to the world's resources and have not had the opportunity to enjoy creation as God intended for all people. Those who hunger and

thirst for justice are the ones who long for a justice that has been denied them; who have no reason for hope, no cause for joy, and no access to the resources of this world.

Throughout the history of this world, it had always been the other people who were considered blessed: the rich, the filled up, the powerful. Jesus turns it all upside-down. The elite in God's kingdom, the blessed ones in God's kingdom, are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity. The point of these blessings is not to offer "entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven" but to describe the nature of God's rule. The people who benefit when God rules, Jesus declares, are those who otherwise have no reason for hope or cause for joy, who have been denied their share of God's blessings in this world and deprived of justice—people for whom things have not been the way they ought to be. God's coming kingdom is a blessing because when God rules, all this will change and things will be set right.