

BLESSED
Matthew 5:1-12
January 29, 2017
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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"We were blessed," singer-songwriter, Lucinda Williams writes by

"The minister
Who practiced what he preached
We were blessed by the poor man
Who said heaven is within reach
We were blessed by the girl selling roses
Who showed us how to live
We were blessed by the blind man
Who could see for miles and miles
We were blessed by the prisoner
Who knew how to be free
We were blessed. We were blessed."ⁱ

We were blessed our 2016 Annual Congregational Report tells us by the challenge of New Beginnings. We were blessed with the call to re-imagine our community. We were blessed with the challenge to open our buildings to expanded use. We were blessed with the need to draw closer to one another. We were blessed with the prayer that God uses this congregation for the good of Salina. We were blessed with sharpened vision - we were blessed with renewed mission. We were blessed with deeper relationships. We were blessed.

We used our blessing to in turn bless others. We saw that blessing in the faces of our children and youth. We heard it in the joyful shouts of kids overflowing at Heartland Day Camp and CASTLE. We experienced blessing upon blessing as we took on the USDA Commodities program - as we painted homes for Habitat for Humanity - as we bagged food at the Food Bank. We heard that blessing in songs from our choirs - in lessons from our classes - in the warmth of new prayer shawls. We experienced blessing in worship and in play and in study and even in taking care of our building. We were blessed.

But we must admit our blessing didn't always look as we imagined it might. Many of us would see blessing for a congregation in larger numbers. Others would see blessing in the form of large donations to mission. Some might seek blessing in better buildings and facilities. Blessing - we too often think - is more. More people, more money, more stuff, more power, more prestige. We conceive of

blessing as "having" instead of "giving." When we think in these terms, we often miss the opportunity to be blessed. We miss our blessing because we are looking for it to be something else.

None of us wants to miss the opportunity to be blessed. That's why it's important to listen to Jesus in our morning reading from Matthew. Listen as Jesus tells us: Blessed are the poor in spirit - blessed are those who mourn - blessed are the meek - blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - blessed are the merciful - blessed are the pure in heart - blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are even those who people who find themselves hated and trolled on the internet - Blessed are the people that other people say all kinds of awful things about them. Blessed are these people, Jesus says. Jesus does not say blessed are the wealthy - blessed are the powerful - blessed are the wise. Jesus tells us we've been looking in the wrong direction for blessing. He says we'll find blessing with the downtrodden and the poor.

Denise Anderson, the co-moderator of the PCUSA, writes that this group "were blessed, but not because they were particularly happy or esteemed, and certainly not because they were without troubles. They were blessed because in a unique and profound way God was near to them. God comforts the mourner, therefore she is blessed. The peacemaker is a child of God, therefore he is blessed."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus turns our notion of the vision of the church on its head. The ones who are blessed are the same ones in our community we are called upon to walk alongside. The ones who are blessed are the ones we can so easily overlook in our eagerness to be successful. Being blessed and blessing others is not about being successful. It is about being present - blessing is about opening our eyes to the realities around us and staying in the room with grief and sadness - it is about taking up the mantle of social justice - it is about making peace instead of not war. Blessing is about letting go of our stuff and taking on the Kingdom of God.

Denise Anderson says it this way: "This past summer I presided over my denomination's General Assembly when we adopted the Confession of Belhar. The confession rose out of apartheid-era South Africa, and among its most elegant assertions is that 'God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.'"

She continues, "God is the God of the destitute. God is the God of the poor. God is the God of the wronged. That portion of the confession is, as far as I can tell, one of the best expositions of the Beatitudes in existence. It says that God is not necessarily impressed with the impressive. God does not necessarily feel privileged to be among the privileged. The blessed ones are the ones who are often

unimpressive. The blessed ones are those who are often overlooked by the privileged."ⁱⁱⁱ

The blessing comes in the form of smiles from our little ones. In the knowledge that we helped offer soup to those who had little. The blessing comes when we see the fruit of our nurturing of our children and youth. The blessing comes as we open ourselves to seek out those whom Jesus names.

Sunrise Presbyterian Church has been blessed in 2016. Jesus calls us to be blessed in 2017. Jesus also calls us to be a blessing for others in 2017. Shall we continue this New Beginning we made in 2016? Shall we keep asking ourselves questions about what we might do to help our neighbors? Shall we keep trying to understand our neighbors - even though they might be a different race or faith tradition from us? Shall we keep reaching out? Shall we embrace God's Kingdom right here in Salina? Shall we? Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Lucinda Williams, "Blessed"

ⁱⁱ Denise Anderson, Living By the Word in Christian Century, Dec. 30, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.