

We are Blessed? by Holly C. W. Aastuen
February 2, 2014 Matthew 5:1-12

Happiness is, happiness is, happiness is...different things to different people, that's what happiness is.

What is happiness to you? What brings you happiness? For me, what brings me the most happiness is my family, my husband and three sons. Over the years they have brought me some of the happiest moments in my life.

Beyond that, when I take a moment to think beyond my immediate family to the moments of happiness I remember clearly, I find that those happiest times are linked to freedom.

The first that came to mind was the freeing of the Iranian hostages. After 444 days of captivity in and around Tehran, the hostages that were taken at the American embassy were freed on January 20, 1981. Ronald Reagan had just been sworn in as president and we watched as we saw those first Americans stepping off the airplane in Germany. Tears of joy streamed down my face as I imagined what emotions they were going through and how happy they and their families must have been.

February 11, 1990 was another remarkable day, the day that Nelson Mandela was freed from prison. I was just watching archival videos of that moment and the tears streamed down my face again. After 27 years of imprisonment, this remarkable man, who had worked so hard for the freedom of his people, was himself free.

Happiness is how some Bible translations characterize our reading for today. The Good News Version of the Bible reads: "Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them!"

The Greek word that is here translated 'happy' is the word Makarios which means receiving God's favor. More than simply happy feelings what's meant to be conveyed is being blessed, being infused with the grace of God.

The Beatitudes are structured around two main themes of blessing. The first four Beatitudes proclaim good news for those who are struggling that they will soon be free from hindrance. They declare freedom from: freedom from despair (blessed are the poor in spirit); freedom from grief (blessed are those who mourn); freedom from want (blessed are the meek); and freedom from injustice (blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness).

The second four Beatitudes proclaim the rewards that will come to those who do good things in this world. They declare freedom for: freedom for healing (blessed are the merciful); freedom for integrity (blessed are the pure in heart); freedom for peace (blessed are the peacemakers); and freedom for faithfulness (blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake). [source: Luther Seminary Professor Mary Hinkle Shore]

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Blessings from God give us freedom from pain and freedom for spreading good news of comfort and hope.

I have this funny habit, I thought I was the only one, but I now know I share it with at least one of my cousins. I read the acknowledgements page of every book I read. Even if I've never heard of the author, even if the author lives and works in another country and has never visited the United States. I read the acknowledgements to see if I'm in there, or if, at least, there's someone in there I recognize.

Reading the acknowledgments in a book by an author you've never met makes no logical sense. And yet, all of us have a need to be acknowledged, to be identified as one who is worthy of praise, worthy of occupying this corner of the earth.

I think that's why the Beatitudes is a perennial favorite among Christians. It takes our common human experience, acknowledges our struggles and pains, our sorrows and strivings and holds them up as something worth acknowledging and holds us up as people worthy of blessing.

The Beatitudes bless us with freedom from despair, grief, want and injustice and give us freedom for healing, integrity, peace and faithfulness. But all is not sweetness and light. Some of these blessings acknowledge that there are those of us who go through hard times:

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.

This hardly seems like the kind of blessing for which we would subscribe. Why would we rejoice for being persecuted and reviled?

And yet, many a person who has stood up in the midst of evil and spoken for what was right, can tell you it is no walk in the park. Sometimes being a friend of Jesus can be hard and excruciating work. Many have been persecuted for following the ways of Christ.

But in all our struggles and suffering we are blessed. Those of you who are going through hard times, you are blessed. Those of you who are merciful, you are blessed. Those of you who make peace, you are blessed. Those of you who mourn, you are blessed.

I read a story recently that reminded me of the pain and the triumph of God's blessings. It is a story of the self-giving love of a woman and the legacy she left after her death.

The letter was received by a Christian radio station in December 2013.

The letter is dated August 3, 2011:

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Hello my name is Brenda Schmitz. When you are in receipt of this letter I will have already lost my battle to ovarian cancer. I am writing this letter to have sent to you by a dear friend who has instructions to do so when it was the time...I told her that once my loving husband David had moved on in his life and met someone to share his life with again to mail this letter to all of you at the station.

I always enjoyed thru the years the Christmas wish you all put on. it is a tremendous and thoughtful deal you do for people that truly exemplifies what Christmas is all about. As I was thinking about my last months on earth I told David my wishes after I was gone that I believe he followed thru with the attitude and courage I know he possesses. What a great husband and father he is. I know all this is extremely hard on him. He is the one making the best decisions from here on out for my family and ultimately finding a caring, compassionate loving woman in time to help raise the boys. She must be quite a lady and I wish I could have met, to take on the task of raising a larger extended family with unwavering love and devotion and a huge heart...

We have 4 boys, Carter, Josh, Justin and my lil' Max. Max is the youngest at 2 years old. I was diagnosed right after his 1st birthday. No child as young as Max should lose his mother and it brings tears to my eyes now thinking of it. God I will miss seeing him and the boys grow up to be fine men. I have relayed to David to try and not let him forget me. He is such a bright, intelligent, beautiful boy. I will miss all my boys...

My reason for writing is this. I have a wish. I have a wish for David, the boys, and the woman and her family if she has kids also...

First for David's new lifelong partner. A day or better yet a weekend of pampering in all aspects of her life. Hair, makeup, body massage, clothes, shopping, spa or weekend getaway. Whatever. She deserves it. Being a step-mother to all those boys and especially giving lil' Max a "mothers love" that only she can give. Make her smile and know her efforts are truly appreciated from me...Thank you--I love you whoever you are...For the family--a magical trip somewhere where they can all enjoy their company and companionship as a family and create those memories that will be with them forever. Finally the cancer doctors at Mercy Hospital and nurses of 8 south. Dr. Carlson, Dr. Turner, Deb Schnoor, Marie Rudolf. A night full of drinks, food and fun for all they do every day for the cancer patients they encounter.

May God Bless and keep all of you safe there. Thanks for this...Brenda.

No one was happy for the pain this woman had to go through and the grief that her passing caused. But all of those who loved her and even those of us who never even knew her, were blessed by her life, by her self-giving love.

Happiness is different things to different people. Blessing brings joy even in the midst of sorrow because the spirit of God is living within us, in our hearts. We are blessed with

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the joy of knowing that God is with us and in us and walks with us through any and all circumstances.

Being blessed frees us from much of the worry and trouble that preoccupies much of the world and focuses us on the blessings we receive. I'm not happy it's cold outside, but I am blessed to be with fellow Christians who love and serve God and neighbor and that thought warms me to the core. I'm not happy my husband is unemployed, but I am blessed with a job that supports our family and have faith that someday soon his talents and skills will again be employed. I'm not happy that people sometimes criticize or say bad things about me or people I care about, but I am blessed that I serve a God who will never despise or forsake me, who will always love me, will always love you as a beloved child of God.

Such blessing is freeing indeed, for we know that any current sufferings are nothing compared to the blessings we have in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.