

Blessed!

Matthew 5:3-16

September 9, 2007

Carry your candle and go light your world!

That is what Jesus calls us to do. That is what Jesus calls you to do. Not to live a quiet, peaceful, god-fearing life, but to light up the world, to let your light shine, to let your light, the light that God has put in you, show near and far, bringing a warming and healing and illuminating light to people engulfed by darkness, and bringing honor and praise to God.

You are called by Jesus, not to stay out -- to stay out of trouble, to stay out of dangerous places, to stay away from conflict -- but to stay in, to stay involved, to stay engaged with the world and its people, as it is. You are called by Jesus to be like salt, like salt that does its job, not while it's still sitting in its container, but once it's put in and mixed in.

Like salt, you are called by Jesus to be a preservative, to help preserve the rest of the human race, to keep it from rotting, to keep it from spoiling. You keep it fresh, you keep it good, you keep it from going bad, by the witness of your words and the witness of your actions.

And like salt, you are called by Jesus to add some spice to life! Who says living a Christian life is dull and boring? It is dull and boring to build your life around the pursuit of money, instead of the pursuit of righteousness. It is dull and boring to spend your life accumulating lots and lots of interesting things, instead of spending your life giving yourself away to lots and lots of interesting people. It is dull and boring to live to satisfy the petty desires of one single human being -- yourself, instead of living to share the joys and heartaches of a whole family of God's children. Living a Christian life, a life of following Jesus, is an adventure, a constant challenge, an exhilarating experience, an unforgettable journey. You are called by Jesus to be like salt, to put some flavor into this life!

You are like salt for the whole human race ... You are like light for the whole world ... But what if you don't feel ready for all of that?

What if you have nothing to give? What if you feel empty -- empty of faith, but full of doubt? What if you feel, not spiritually rich, but spiritually poor?

What if you are preoccupied with grief? What if you are mourning the loss of a spouse or the loss of a friend or the loss of your youth? What if you are mourning your own mistakes or the mistakes of someone near and dear to you?

What if you don't think you have what it takes? What if you feel you are no more than a spiritual novice, a learner, a baby? What if you know there are others who know so much more and can do so much more than you ever could? What if you don't feel like a leader, a doer, a saint, but just a humble Christian?

Or what if you've run into all kinds of trouble whenever you've tried to stick your neck out? What if people have made fun of your faith or told you to mind your own business or accused you of having some hidden agenda? What if you feel persecuted?

You are spiritually poor. You are mourning. You feel humble. You feel persecuted. Do you see where this is going?

Blessed are those who know they are spiritually poor ...

Blessed are those who mourn ...

Blessed are those who are humble ...

Blessed are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires ...

They are blessed! You are blessed! You are blessed! As you are, where you are, however you are. God will comfort you! God will show you mercy! God will reward you! The kingdom of heaven itself will belong to you!

This is where Jesus begins ... with a blessing. These are the first verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a sermon that issues a radical call to discipleship, a call to radical discipleship, a call to follow Jesus all the way, with no compromises and no excuses. It is a sermon that calls you to love your enemies, to seek God's kingdom before and above everything else, to turn your attention from material possessions, to put an end to hypocritical judgment of other people, and to examine yourself carefully -- your actions and your motives, too. But it begins ... with a blessing.

This is where God stories always begin ... with a blessing. God stories always begin with grace.

There is the grace of creation. God brings into being a wonderful and beautiful universe and declares that it is good and offers to human beings the grace of tending it and enjoying it.

There is the grace of God's call to Abraham. God chooses Abraham. God chooses to bless Abraham. And God calls Abraham to be a blessing, for the sake of all the nations, for the sake of all humanity.

There is the grace of the story of the exodus. God hears the cries of Hebrew slaves in Egypt and makes a promise to set them free and to make them his own.

There is the grace of the message of the prophets, calling the people back and back and back again, back from apostasy, back from faithlessness, back from selfish greed, back from unfairness and injustice, holding out again and again God's offer of forgiveness, God's offer of a new start and a new life, God's offer of grace.

And there is the grace of Jesus. Jesus, the Word, the living Word, who became a human being and lived among us, full of grace and truth! Jesus, who ate with sinners and welcomed outcasts. Jesus, who taught us to call God, Father, and to believe that God, like a loving Father, wants nothing more than to give his children the best of gifts. Jesus, who himself offered humanity the best of gifts -- eternal life -- and secured it by giving up his own.

God stories always begin with grace. I hope you know that. I hope you believe that! And I hope you have heard that and will hear that clearly from me. The Christian story is not first of all about what is required of you, about rules and duties and obligations. The Christian story is first of all, and most of all, about what God does for us, about what God does for all of humanity, because that is who God is!

The Christian story begins with grace. Come, and follow! Come, and be set free from whatever it is that binds you! Come and eat and be satisfied! Come and drink and be refreshed! Come and be healed! Come and receive the gift of life in all its abundance! Come and enter the joy of the Lord!

And Jesus begins with grace ...

You who feel spiritually poor, spiritually weak, you are blessed! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you!

You who are grieving, you are blessed! God will comfort you!

You who feel unimportant, second-rate, humble, you are blessed! You will receive all that God has promised!

You who want more, even if you don't know exactly what it is, who are hungry and thirsty for something more, for something meaningful, for something good, you are blessed! God will give you what you want!

You who show mercy to other people, you are blessed! God will show mercy to you!

You who want to see God more than anything else, you are blessed! You will see God!

You who try to bring people together, who try to heal divisions between people, who work for peace, you are blessed! God will call you his own children, because you are doing what he does!

You who suffer ridicule and rejection and abuse when you try to do the right thing, you are blessed! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you! That's how people who try to do the right thing have always been treated.

You are like salt for the whole human race. If salt loses its saltiness, it is worthless and will be thrown out. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. You don't cover a lighted candle, but let it shine out where it can give light to all around. You must let your light shine in front of everyone, so they will see the good things you do and give praise to your father in heaven.

You are like salt for the whole human race. You are like light for the whole world. But, first of all, you are blessed!