

SERMON: "JOYFUL FOR ... GOD'S BLESSINGS"
TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT GENESIS 12:1-4
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 5:1-12

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Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

It was the end of my first year of seminary. I went to Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. There is an excellent seminary in the Atlanta area Columbia in Decatur, but I thought it best to leave my hometown for seminary. That said, after that first year I knew I wanted to go home for the summer. I wanted to play softball with my dad.

Got a job working at First church in Athens, lived there but often went back to Atlanta (just a little over an hour away) to enjoy time with family. I remember the first softball game. My dad and I were walking onto the field where the guys were warming up, stretching and playing catch. One of them called out. "Well look here. Here come the Kivett boys."

Two different reactions to that greeting. I was in my early twenties. I stiffened a bit defensively thinking "who you calling 'boy'?" Then I noticed my dad's response. He would have been in his late fifties at the time. He had a big smile on his face and now just a bit more spring in his step. He was feeling it.

We both heard the same words but heard them differently.
The things we hear other people say to us, about us, have their effect.
Some may put us on the defensive, some may put a spring in our step.
How we see ourselves and our place in the world are shaped in large part by the words other people use to describe us and define us.

Think about how important those words are from parent to child.
those smiles, those kisses, those words of encouragement and support.
That continues through a lifetime and expands to include other voices.
teachers, coaches, mentors, colleagues, friends, bosses.

Now the other side of the coin is that those voices aren't always positive.
Sometimes there is some tough love because truth telling is needed.
Sometimes the voices are critical, even cruel. Often times they're labels.
someone else sticks on us so as to sum up who we are with one label
and we are defined by that label and others.

That's the world we live in – words that define us, label us.
Then a teacher from Nazareth comes along and redefines our definitions.
In the summary of his teaching, that is the Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus does a whole lot of re-defining our definitions with "you've heard it said.
but I say to you." He kicks that off with the Beatitudes and what we call 'blessed'.

BLESSED ARE ...

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying: “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.

I’ve been preaching and teaching long enough to take notice of your reactions ... when you laugh or lean in, when you get quiet, when you look at someone near you as if to ask, ‘did he just say what I think he said.’ I’d venture a good guess there was a whole lot of that going on as Jesus began to speak and talk about who is blessed ... Not the usual suspects.

These are the people Jesus says are blessed – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers. These are not the people on the magazine covers smiling at us in the checkout line at the grocery store – the photogenic celebrities looking fine with headlines like, “I found strength I didn’t know I had.”

Jesus doesn’t name the people we’d think of as blessed
He names people we don’t even see, people we overlook.
He starts with people who are defined by what they do not have, the poor in spirit.
He then mentions people who mourn, who are in pain.

He explains each. The poor in spirit – theirs is the kingdom of heaven (that is what they do have). And those who mourn – they will be comforted
That kind of explanation he will use again talking about how the people named will get their blessing through the experience and in God’s good time
They will inherit the earth, they will be filled, they will receive mercy.

However Jesus explains the blessing ... each is a surprise, each is a re-definition
It is this re-definition of blessed that is meant to stick with us as we hear Jesus’ teaching with each group of people counted as blessed reinforcing the re-defining of what it means to be blessed.

What the world sees and says is not what Jesus’ sees and says.
Blessed is not necessarily having more – like lots of presents under the tree
Blessed is to have what gets you through, what gives you strength to keep going
That sticks out with the last two groups of people Jesus calls blessed

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, 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.

COUNT YOUR MANY BLESSINGS

Did you notice how he shifts from talking about those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness to include you in that number, “blessed are you”? I think that is where he was heading all along ... telling us we are not defined by whatever labels the guys playing catch might use.

We are defined by the way God sees us, by what God says about us especially when we might be going through some stuff because we are living by God’s definitions instead of the world’s definitions. When we are living that counter cultural, Jesus’ following way with different definitions we are blessed ... blessed through those experiences

One scholar has a synonym of blessed as defined by Jesus as ‘honored’ I really like that. The people Jesus names here are honored Like saying these people did the right thing the right way It’s valuing the process just as much as the end product

Hearing Jesus re-define what it means to be blessed got me to thinking about how to count my blessings. Count your many blessings, count them one by one. I’ve learned over the years to start counting with things I tend to take for granted – a roof over my head, food on my table, family and friends round that table

Then as I count on from there, I realize I’m not counting things I’m recounting God’s presence through things – blessed through My blessings aren’t trophies. No, I think they are more like the armbands you get at concerts (and at the cancer center) that say “I’m in this.”

In and through we recognize our being blessed ... so much so we can rejoice Hear again that last beatitude, the one addressed to ‘you.’

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.

Jesus not only re-defines ‘blessed’ ... he defines joy.
We can rejoice and be glad as people revile us and persecute us and utter all kinds of evil against us falsely on his account
Please note the direction that is going – We are not to be the ones doing the reviling, persecuting or talking bad or down. No Christian bullying, please!

What does that say about joy?

That Jesus tells us to rejoice and be glad at and through times like that I ask because I’m supposed to be kicking off a series of sermons on joy with a sermon on being joyful for our blessings.

SUMMARY

One of the things that got Johnny and I thinking about joy (and about this series) was a reference I made in a sermon a while back about not letting anyone or anything take away your joy. What then is this joy that cannot be taken from us?

What is this joy that we might have and hold onto through tough times ...
so much so that we can rejoice and be glad in the face of the bullies
who in the same way persecuted the prophets who came before us?
How might we define that kind of joy?

I looked up some definitions. Most talk about joy as a kind of happiness
That makes sense - happiness, makes me want to smile.
From that common ground, I'll try a simple definition of joy
Joy is happiness with deep roots, roots in God's love

Happiness lasts for a little while ... and it is good
Joy lasts a good long time ... and it is both good and grounded
It is joy through, just like it is blessed through

I've certainly felt both (blessed and joyful) through my cancer treatments
I go to the doctor tomorrow to hear the results of my scan
I may need further surgery. I may be done ... and can talk about cancer
in the past tense (looking forward to that)

I've been upheld throughout by your support, your prayers, your cards
I've received cards from other churches in the area too – both First churches
I also got cards from my brother Mike's church in Ohio
One from a prayer group 40 women strong that included this prayer
I think it speaks to what it means to be blessed (and be joyful) through

*I said a prayer for you today and I know God must have heard.
I felt the answer in my heart although he spoke no word.
I didn't ask for wealth or fame (I knew you wouldn't mind)
I asked God to send treasures of a more lasting kind
I asked the Lord be near you at the start of each new day
to grant you health and blessings and friends to share the way.
I asked for happiness for you in all things great and small.
But it was for God's loving care I asked for most of all.*

In that loving care, I will 'rejoice and be glad" both hearing this prayer
prayed for me ... And as you hear me now praying it for you