

<Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15:1-5; Matthew 5:1-12>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* is considered a top literary read, especially for high school students who, typically, do not feel inclined to invest the energy necessary to read and interpret iambic pentameter and Elizabethan speech. All the more's the pity, because *Romeo & Juliet* remains not only a story of tragic love but an insight for those of us living in this world. It has been commentated and discussed at length for generations. Perhaps unsurprising to any of you, one particular insight that I have taken from this work is of a pastoral nature.

In Act III, Scene III, the audience finds itself in the midst of the major conflict of the story. Mercutio has been killed by Tybalt, and Tybalt in turn has been killed by Romeo, and Romeo is now in hiding at the church for fear of his own life. He does not know how Juliet will respond to the knowledge that he killed her cousin, or whether he, himself, will be able to keep his own life from the executioner. Things look quite bleak for Romeo and the future of our star-crossed lovers. Romeo attempts to seek counsel from Friar Laurence but isn't really listening to anything the churchman has to offer.

Until - enter stage left - Juliet's Nurse arrives with news: Juliet still loves Romeo, and Romeo is not to be executed, only banished. Both Romeo's fears turn out to be less than feared, but still Romeo is unable to accept the good in them. And here's where we find the insight that I so readily claim and cling to: in his frustration at being unable to counsel or console Romeo, Friar Laurence exclaims, "A pack of blessings lights upon thy back...; But, like a misbehaved and sullen wench, Thou pout'st upon thy fortune and thy love."

In other words, 'get your head out of the ground and be thankful for what you have received, which, even though it is not what you want, could have been so much worse.'

Though Romeo's emotions and teenage angst prohibit him from recognizing the blessings, we, the audience, can see with Friar Laurence just how blessed he actually is.

How do we determine who receives a blessing, or who deserves to be blessed? Is it through prior achievements or accolades? That's usually how we determine awards. Is it through the quality of an idea or plan of action? That's often the process for grants. Is it through who can afford them? That works in a transactional relationship. But none of those quite apply to the church, and none of them apply when it comes to receiving or recognizing blessings. How do we qualify who might be worthy of being blessed?

Blessings, themselves, are unique, and transcend any of our more-readily understood concepts such as awards or accolades. Those can be earned and generally stem from the effort or work of an individual or group. But blessings are neither, and they come not

from human recognition but from Divine providence. Even when referred to as divine favor, we are perhaps taking on too much of the understanding in a human dynamic. Blessings, we must remember, are solely the provenance and provision of God. And they are offered through God's determination.

But we can learn much, and grow in faith, as we pay attention to those whom God blesses.

It is notable that Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount - the first recorded sermon in Matthew's gospel - with listing off what we know as The Beatitudes - the blessings for the people. First things tend to carry a bit more weight, and they set the trajectory for what is to come. This is still true today, but it was given even more bearing in Jewish culture in the Ancient Near East; the way a person began a thing - such as Jesus beginning his ministry - spoke volumes about their purpose, intent, and direction. And we see this present and at work in these Beatitudes, these blessings, in Jesus' first sermon.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...the merciful...the pure in heart...the peacemakers...the persecuted. Blessed are...”.

This is not the expected kind of list of who might be lifted up and blessed above all others. Even in this day age, as we are familiar with the Beatitudes, this list does not align with who might typically be lifted up with accolades and acclaim, who we might look at, perhaps with envy, and speak of being blessed. We might think of athletes, or politicians, or the wealthy. We might look to authors and Nobel laureates and notable figures in culture, music, and cinema. Or, conversely, we might see the destitute or the poor and think of just how “un-blessed” they are. We have allowed the general narrative to equate blessing with wealth and acclaim and notoriety, all aspects of earthly power, while we have forgotten to see and to lift up those whom God blesses. And if anyone is guilty of that, I certainly am.

But God would remind us of a different dynamic present and at work in the Kingdom of God, and Jesus begins his ministry by lifting it up and highlighting it, as well. Those who are blessed in God's view, in God's Kingdom, in Jesus' words are the ones who are so often overlooked and passed over by our world.

But if we're still looking for a set of criteria used for qualifications, we need look no further than the prophets, and particularly, Micah.

In terms of historical context, Micah was in a somewhat unique position and role. At the time of his ministry, the overall nation of God had split into two, a Northern Kingdom which retained the name “Israel,” and a Southern Kingdom which was called “Judah.” Israel, the northern kingdom, has recently been conquered by the Assyrian Empire, much to Micah's grief, and the fear of everyone in Judah, thinking they might be next, and now Micah speaks with warning to Judah. He warns that, unless they would follow

in the same path, they must heed God’s calling to life and discipleship anew. Anticipating their question, Micah has ready his answer, and we are given that now well-known phrasing. “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Justice...Kindness...Humility before God. These are the hallmarks and characteristics which God calls of us, and it is by these characteristics that we will recognize blessing. Not in that we have earned them by our works or even by our intent, but rather living in such a way will open our eyes and our spirits to recognize the blessings that God is bestowing within the world. Living in such a way will enable us to better see and recognize those whom God sees and lifts up. It is not a qualification earned but a recognition enabled.

Which is part of why Jesus began his ministry with these Beatitudes, to lift up and bring back to awareness those whom God blesses above those whom the world acclaims. The Beatitudes represent and speak to the people who are often overlooked, unseen, and given no agency in decision-making, even the ones which affect them. The Beatitudes speak with hope, comfort, and with challenge. As Karoline Lewis puts it, “The first thing that Jesus teaches about life in the kingdom of God is that it is for people who are *in need*. It is also significant that the kingdom of God is built on promises...”.

“A pack of blessings lights upon thy back.” The truth of that matter is that we are indeed blessed. Perhaps not always in the way the world defines and recognizes, but in the fullness of God’s love we have received blessing upon blessing, a love which nothing in this world or our capability is able to separate. Found within these, as well, is the promise and hope of the kingdom that is to come, and the kingdom which is being realized even in this very day! We are a people who live by the blessings of God; may we receive and recognize them all the more. And as we follow in the blessings we have received, may we uplift and bless others in the manner of God, as well. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*