

Sermon, Lent 2, Cashmere Presbyterian  
Rev Silvia Purdie

Readings

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

So, folks, lets start with a nice big question for a nice summer's day ...  
So, what does it mean to be a Christian?

There are lots of excellent answers to this question ... perhaps the most obvious might be to follow Jesus  
Maybe it means to belong to the church  
Maybe it is about the values that you live by  
Or maybe it is being saved, knowing you are eternally loved ... heaps of great answers.

I have for you one possible answer to the question 'what does it mean to be a Christian' and it is this – short and sweet for a summer's morning:  
To be blessed and to be a blessing  
My theme for today is to be a blessing  
And my claim is that we can only BE a blessing when we experience ourselves as blessed.

'Count your blessings' – remember that one.

These days mental health professionals often tell their patients to keep a gratitude journal, to list things you can be grateful for

I wonder what blessings you are most grateful for today

For me, I am enormously grateful for the privilege of being a minister in the church, and this church in particular. Every day I am grateful for my calling and for people who are gracious enough to me to accept me into their lives and listen to what I might have to say and be willing to pray with me and for me

I am also very grateful for a wonderful house to call our new home, for blessings of space to grow a garden

For a loving husband and great kids

My whole life long I have felt richly blessed. The words of Jesus echo in my soul – to whom much is given much is expected.

It's not so easy to feel richly blessed when your house has to be bulldozed, or when your children are far away or struggling, or when relationships are strained, and when there's no money in the bank account.

It is not so easy to feel richly blessed when your body and brain don't do what they used to, and when you live with discomfort, pain or exhaustion.

I dare to stand up here this morning and claim that each and every one of us who have chosen to follow Christ are being blessed by God in powerful wonderful ways, even when we struggle to find things to be grateful for, and that each one of us, no matter how able we feel ourselves to be, each of us is called and equipped to be a blessing to others.

We love because God first loved us.

We serve because we are served by Jesus Christ and we signed up to be on his staff team.

We are blessed so that we might be a blessing.

And the more we make ourselves available to bless and serve others the more we ourselves are blessed and served in new and deeper ways.

You know that being a Christian involves service, ministry, mission, being nice to people, going the extra mile ... you've been taught that all your lives, I expect. You have experienced in your own life the flow of love and shared life that happens when you go out of your way to be a blessing to another person. And if you are a proper Presbyterian, brought up to be a Good Christian, you will likely feel guilty and frustrated when you cannot serve for whatever reason, as you struggle with limitations of time and energy, with diminishing health or increasing demands.

It is an odd thing for me coming in to this community after 5 years of trauma, dislocation, grief and stress. I know that the people of Christchurch are applauded all around the country for your concern for each other, your neighbourliness and community spirit. I also know that it is darned hard to care for other people when your own life is shattered or under pressure or uncertain. So I do congratulate you all for your care for others, for your determination to be a blessing to others even when you have each been sorely in need yourselves.

I am not interested in adding to your guilt or telling you what you should do. What I am interested in is this ... what is God doing?

What is Jesus Christ doing in this community, and in your lives?

If we could turn to our Gospel reading for the day, this finds Jesus at a point of his own life being under threat. Some friendly Pharisees came to him deeply concerned for his safety, wanting him to take care, to place himself out of harms way, to be sensible. And Jesus' answer is exactly what they didn't want to hear. He reminds them of his calling to go to Jerusalem. He

connects himself with the prophets of old who were rejected and killed by those in power. He says 'I'm still busy working and that's what matters. I will work while I can work, today, tomorrow and the day after that' And then he says one of my favourite lines in scripture ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to put my arms around all your people, to gather them all to me like a mother hen shelters her chicks close under her feathers

It is a lament, a cry from the heart of Jesus, for he cries 'but you would not let me!'

His work of restoring the people of Israel to God was unfinished, rejected, failed as he walked toward the cross. His words and actions could not accomplish this, could not draw all the people into the heart of God. No, this would cost Jesus everything, every pain and sorrow, his life itself, all had to be given up for this.

And so we are on the path toward Easter, the journey toward the cross. It is not one of triumph or celebration. It is one of surrender and brutal honesty.

This way, the way of the cross, is how Jesus calls us to share in his work, to be blessed and a blessing.

So our gratitude, our sense of who we are and what we might have to give, these must grow out of knowing what Jesus longed for and what Jesus did and what Jesus sacrificed for us.

I want to talk about two ways in which we block the work of Jesus in our lives, in which we block our ability to be blessed and to be a blessing. Both are ways in which we talk to ourselves inside our own minds, which shapes our basic attitudes and assumptions about who we are and what we have to offer.

The first is that many people feel, or are afraid to feel, more of a burden than a blessing. "Oh, I'm just a nobody", people have told me. "I'm not very good at anything."

Many people go their whole lives apologizing for their very existence, having been told as children that they were a waste of space, or even, unwanted. Other people have worked hard for so many years and as they move into old age their capacity to work slips away, and they hate feeling dependent, rage against it, rage against their aging bodies and even at those who try to help.

Is that your worst fear, to be a burden?

If so, hear again the heart cry of Jesus – How I long to draw you to myself, like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings

At every stage of our lives we are blessed and we can be a blessing ... the Christian life is not actually about being good and useful all the time, it's not actually what we DO, we don't actually have to be helpful and nice at all times, we don't always have to keep the peace or do what the church asks of us ... it is not actually dependent on our abilities or personal resources. Being a Christian is first and foremost being simply a little ball of fluff under the wing of the mother hen. This is the heart of our blessed-ness, that we are safe in the arms of Jesus, held and known and loved just as you are today.

The second attitude that blocks the flow of God's blessing in and out of our lives is perhaps an opposite one ... not that we have nothing to offer but that what we have belongs to us, in fact, that what we have is what we deserve. A sense of personal entitlement. This is the catch cry of 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture – 'because you deserve it', 'you're worth it!' ... you've earned it, treat yourself, you are entitled to this! ... that's how to sell cars and shampoo, holidays in Fiji and fancy face creams.

One of the standing jokes in our family comes from the movie 'Finding Nemo'. Nemo finally escapes from the fishbowl in the mad dentist's office, out through Sydney's sewerage system, and at the outflow he is almost eaten by a bunch of noisy seagulls who continually yell out 'MINE', 'Mine!', 'Mine!'.

This almost seems like the theme of our consumer culture ... 'mine!', 'mine'

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My time, my money, my interests

The call of Christ to self sacrificial service has always been counter-cultural, a bit nuts in every culture and era, but in our society it is especially difficult, especially abnormal. We want to be paid, rewarded, reimbursed, of course we do. You don't get something for nothing. What's in it for me?

It was probably much the same in Philippi, that trendy city trying to be more Roman than the Romans.

As the Good News puts in quite bluntly,

"their god is their bodily desires. They are proud of what they should be ashamed of, and they think only of things that belong to this world."

Paul draws a stark contrast between what is normal in the society around us, and lays it on the line for the early Christians ... relinquish your citizenship of this society! You are now in Christ, you are now citizens of

Heaven. Your identity is now fundamentally different from the norms of the world.

We are being changed by the power of God, writes Paul, the power of God that is at work to bring all things under the lordship of Christ

Gathering all people under the wings of Christ

This is the all-encompassing vision of scripture, which sees the basic flow of human history, despite all that tears us away from each other and from God, despite everything, God is at work to draw people to himself, to gather us together as one, in true relationship with each other and with God as the true centre of authority.

This is the Biblical picture of being blessed and being a blessing, that in Christ we are held, we are alive. In our uniqueness God works in us in wonderful unique ways, using what we have and also using our vulnerability and dependence. In our need we are blessed. In our blessedness we are given gifts to share.

I would like to finish by telling you about Olive. She was one of my parishioners at Milson. Since her husband died she had lived alone in a little council flat right beside the railway line. Olive is a tiny lady, with one leg shorter than the other, who would always turn up to church and our Friendship Centre struggling slowly up the ramp, but always with a smile, always asking after other people. Last year she fell and broke her hip, and when they came to operate they found her bones literally crumbling away with osteo arthritis. There was just nothing there to attach a new hip too, and little hope of her ever walking again. But they kept her in hospital and the weeks turned into months, as they moved her from rehab up to the ward and back down again. I tried to visit her most weeks, and she was always so delighted to see me – or she made me feel that way anyway. I could see the pain as she tried unsuccessfully to get comfortable, it hurt her to sit even, or lie on her side. And despite her pain, her inability to do pretty much anything, she still kind of glowed with an inner joy and peace. She hardly ever complained, thought easily of the needs of others, patiently did her exercises through her wincing agony. She doesn't have a big family, she's never had an important job or much money. But Olive is my hero. It was great to see her happily settled in to a rest home before I left, and even walking down the corridor, slowly but steady. Chatting away to the others. I expect that when I am her age or when I'm in pain I will be far more demanding and complaining, but I hope to learn from my dear Olive that even in our own suffering we can still know ourselves as blessed and we can still be a blessing to other people.