

How Can We Bless Our Living?

Friends in faith – gathered via live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and others long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future – let us wonder together this morning: How can we bless our living? I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer.

God of all, we give thanks for the gift of being freely gathered for worship today. We pray that your Holy Spirit will, indeed, open the eyes of our hearts so that we might bear witness to your holy presence among us. We pray as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Makarios. This is the Greek word that the author of the gospel of Luke discerned to be most like what Jesus articulated in his Aramaic language when we now hear the word blessed. *Makarios* means **deep, abiding joy and contentment that come through spiritual abundance**.

Jesus' reputation was growing as a teacher and preacher with healing power. In today's gospel story, Jesus speaks to a crowd that had gathered from throughout the region. The crowd included disciples (people who had already chosen to follow Jesus as their rabbi – to be his devoted students). And the crowd included newcomers who were checking out Jesus to see for themselves if he was genuinely pointing the way to God or more of a false prophet, riding high on attention.

The gathered people varied widely in access to wealth and privilege. On the wide open plain, material prosperity or lack thereof did not differentiate them in Jesus's view. What mattered to him was the posture of their hearts. Jesus was on the lookout for tender, open hearts that could welcome experiences of *makarios* (blessing) – deep, abiding joy and contentment through spiritual abundance.

Jesus encouraged his audience then and encourages us today to become increasingly aware, honest, and compassionate regarding the challenges, pain, grief, and longings that we carry. By sharing our challenges, pain, grief, and longings within community, we become more open to the joy, contentment and abundance of *makarios*.

Jesus was no shiny, smiley preacher promising material prosperity. He saw the real hardships of the people. He saw among his neighbors those who were poor, those who were hungry, those who were grieving, those who were scorned and rejected by society for following Jesus' way of inclusive love. And he saw in those tenderhearted people their openness to a way of blessedness. It is precisely in our spaces of need and longing that we can make space for God's divine love to inhabit us, guiding us toward experiences of deeper joy and contentment.

Let's also be with Jesus for a moment in his woe. As a child, I somehow received the message through the teachings of my church (though I would fault no one specifically) that Jesus was issuing a warning to or condemnation upon the rich, the satisfied, the laughing, the popular. In reality, with the expression "woe to you," Jesus was expressing grief for those who were comfortable with their situation in life. He was concerned that their hearts would not be prepared to expand and be tenderhearted when challenges, pain, grief, and longings came their way. Jesus wasn't talking to distinct groups of people either. He knew that all of us can become too comfortable and isolated in our experiences of ease and that all of us can become more tenderhearted as we connect within community.

We have heard the lyrics to Quaker singer songwriter Carrie Newcomer's song, "Holy As a Day Is Spent" and will hear her sing it a moment.

I first heard this song when I saw her in concert in Madison, Wisconsin in 2009 – during my years as an elementary school teacher. Carrie sings of how we can experience our ordinary daily moments and movements as holy. It requires us to practice holding our hearts open and aware to experiencing God's divine presence in everyone and everything.

I'd like to share with you this morning two recent holy experiences – two times when I have felt *makarios* – deepening joy and contentment through the abundant presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Yesterday I attended a memorial service for Rev. Dr. Clyde Steckel. Clyde lived ninety-six years. He was a professor and dean at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in the decades prior to my graduate studies. He authored numerous books. He loved people and loved the church. I found myself surrounded by numerous people who have been my teachers, mentors and friends.

Soon after I arrived to First Congregational Church of Minnesota in Minneapolis and was finding a seat, I connected with my dear friend, Rev. Kay Welsch. Kay will turn 90 this coming fall. When I was a seminary intern 14 years ago, I was placed at St. Paul's UCC in St. Paul. Kay was serving as a semi-retired (in her mid- to late seventies) part-time Visitation Pastor, making visits to all the homebound members while the congregation also worked toward revitalization.

Because I had previous experience with teaching, leadership, and public speaking, I thought it would make sense if I focused some of my energy during my internship on learning about pastoral care. Kay generously invited me to accompany her on numerous visits across those nine months. She curated a set of experiences so that I would encounter people who were suffering, people at peace, and everything in between.

When Kay and I connected yesterday, we held each other's gaze. Have you ever noticed how much love and care (how much compassion) can be exchanged through eye contact? Kay asked about my family members. She asked about my ministry. I am blessed by her friendship. That is, her friendship is a conduit for *makarios* – deepening joy and contentment through spiritual abundance shared between people.

My other *makarios* story occurred here in our Sanctuary two weeks ago. One of our children, Maya, has given me permission to share our story. We had passed peace at the end of our worship service on a day when we practiced Holy Communion together. As I began to move, I greeted my own son and then Heather. As I was moving toward where Mays and her nana Kim were seated. Maya looked to be a little out of sorts – a little down. Kim was swift to let me know, “Maya is feeling a little sad. She missed Communion. When they said it time for Communion, she came upstairs as quickly as she could, but she missed it.” I could tell Maya was feeling the full weight of this reality for herself.

And I said, “Oh, Maya, let's go do it now – let's take Communion together.” And so we came forward. I realized that our plate of gluten free bread had already exited the space, so I came up and grabbed the loaf and brought it to her, tore her off a piece and reminded her, “This is the body of Christ. You are welcome at this table. You are part of the body, Maya. Take and eat.” She took it. She took it into herself. Then I handed her a cup and said, “This is the cup of blessing for you, Maya. Jesus teaches this is for everyone.” And the waves of relief and pure joy and of having found her spot again in her day and in her community were so palpable that I can still feel them in my body.

Friends, how can we bless our living – both within our life together as a congregation and within the living we do in so many other spaces of community throughout our weeks?

May we watch for those who, like Kay and Maya, model how to be fully present with one another. With Kay, may we make space to practice deep compassion. With Maya, may we risk practicing radical vulnerability and belonging. Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
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Luke 6:17-26, “Holy As a Day Is Spent”