

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 “Blessed For Life”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

lutheransforlife.org

“Blessed” looks like a pretty important pattern. Its thread runs throughout Scripture’s fabric. The word appears more than five hundred times in the Bible. We’d better perceive what it means and what it doesn’t with precision. In Matthew’s New Testament Greek, Jesus says, “*Makarioi*” – “Blessed are.” This ancient adjective *makarioi* captured the carefree contentment of the supposed extraterrestrial entities. The *makarioi* spirits at rest or even so-called pagan gods transcend temporal troubles and have no burden of earthly concerns or work or hurt. *Makarioi* kind of conveys the heavenly pleasantness and serene demeanor of Almighty God.

You might say *makarioi* means “blissful.” “Bliss” brings us back to “blessed.” They sound similar, and in this case, their senses intersect. But “bless” is cut from another cloth than “bliss.” “Bless” comes from the same word as “blood.” “Bless” shares its Old English root with “blood.” “Bless,” meaning “to consecrate by ritual” or “designate as sanctified,” originally meant “to mark with blood.” Since then, of course, “bless” has broadened to include contours of giving thanks, speaking well of, and invoking divine favor upon. And because the language spells “bless” and says it a lot like “bliss,” some of “bliss’s” color has bled in. Now “bless” also sketches a silhouette for us of pronouncing someone prosperous or making one happy.

“Bless” drapes these statements of Jesus in beauty. What comfort we behold in “blessed are.” So our lectionary schedule of weekly readings appoints this text for the Festival of All Saints. Even as grieve their absence, we envision our predecessors and precious ones in the serenity of the world to come. We anticipate the ecstasy of arriving beside them and wearing our own white robes right along with them. And we call these assurances “The Beatitudes” in another accident of etymology. “Beatitude,” though, takes its texture from “beatify,” not “beautiful.” “Beatify” traces back to the Latin *beatus*, which itself substantially matches

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 “Blessed For Life”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

lutheransforlife.org

makarioi. “Beautiful” trickles down from a different Latin term, *bellus*, or *bellum*, and *bellitas*, suggesting something agreeable or appealing to the senses. Curiously enough, *bellum* also has a Latin homonym with identical spelling and pronunciation but a separate origin and definition. *Bellum* in Latin stands for “war.”

“Bless,” “bliss,” but then “blood.” “Beatitude,” “beautiful,” but then “war.” Are you dressing us up or dressing us down, Jesus? I don’t want the world to know me as poor in spirit or persecuted. I don’t like to think of me as meek or mournful. I don’t care to see me as starving or simple-hearted. Even “merciful” and “peacemaking” unravel upon closer inspection. You see, Jesus’ beatitudes accentuate essentially what one doesn’t have and what one doesn’t do.

“Poor in spirit” doesn’t have much to boast of. “Mourn” has nothing to indulge in. “Meek” has no ambition. “Hunger and thirst” go without satisfaction and success. “Merciful” can’t go for the kill and the win. “Pure in heart” hasn’t got secret weapons or backup plans. “Peacemaker” compromises and capitulates. “Persecuted” lacks charisma and respect. “Blessed” appears to best accessorize faded and failure. “Blessed” seems to coordinate only with little and loser. “Blessed” buttons you in needy and naked and nobody. “Blessed” stitches you to incomplete and empty. You know, these styles don’t exactly suit attractive, independent figures such as you and me, do they. Maybe I don’t want to wear this “blessed” brand after all. It feels a bit revealing, maybe even indecent, provocative and prickly like a wool sweater, weathered, threadbare, bloodied.

What makes “blessed” any better than a pathetic embryo? What leaves the blessed any better off than pitiful old age? How come Jesus never fits nobles or emperors, dignified Pharisees or exemplary priests with “blessed”? What about the pretty ones? What about the popular and

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 “Blessed For Life”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

lutheransforlife.org

prosperous? What about those with plenty and power and pride? What becomes of their “blessed are”? Well, if you believe this “blessed” of Jesus, those satins of the world amount to flimsy costumes. Those linens of the flesh, those denims of our own design and production, end up childish disguises. The dark times of guilt and grief show their frayed seams and see-through sections. The hard hours of conflict and crisis expose them as measly mirages. The lonely moments of suffering and dying bare the fragile illusions and falling-apart, falling-down facades.

Beautiful and beatitude derive from different departments. Bless and bliss reside in entirely different districts. Not just in the dictionary, but on the daily, they do. Poor in spirit sounds like human. Meek and mournful rhymes with mortal. Pure in heart and persecuted means creature, sinner in search of mercy and yearning for peace. Whether we feel it, know it, like it, care, or not, from dust we each emerged and to dust shall we all return. Adult or infant, fetus or teenager, elderly or embryo, active or impaired, we sit here failed, fallen, and broken. Not just a few or some or most but all, not only minds or ideas but hearts and bodies, not merely the culture or the country but the cosmos and the species, we have become little, naked, and empty.

No majority opinions will change it. No arguments about rights, no emotional objections, no celebrity endorsements, no corporate support, no professional advocacy will change it. No number of abortions can fix it. No assisted suicides, no embryocidal biotechnologies, no sacrificing undesirables, no harvesting tissues can fix it. In fact, they only increase the guilt and grief, the conflict and crisis, the suffering and dying. Reality stretches just so far before the fibers tighten, constrict, and stifle. As long as we have the DNA in our cells, beautiful is war-torn, blessed is bloodied, and poor in spirit is you and me and humanity.

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 “Blessed For Life”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

lutheransforlife.org

An empty this big only God can fill. A naked this stark only grace can clothe. And He has not created our kind for indulgence, for ambition, for the secret weapon. He has not made our race for independence, for popularity, power, and pride. Almighty God gives us bodies and hearts so that we may be His own. So He blesses us, every one, womb to tomb, by marking Himself with our blood. He has stepped Himself into our human gestating and aging, fetus, teenager, adult, and advanced. He has wrapped Himself within our failed, fallen, and broken. He took on little, naked, and empty. He put on war-torn, weathered, and threadbare. He knows guilt, grief, and conflict. He owns crisis, suffering, and dying.

Our Heavenly Father labels this God in flesh and bone “Jesus.” He means salvation and favor, forgiveness and atonement, redeeming and affirming you and me and humanity from fertilization to forever. His love has the shape of poor in spirit and mourning right alongside us. It has the color of meek and peacemaking in our place. It has the texture of thirsting and persecuted on our behalf. It has the pattern of pure in heart and merciful to our benefit. His crucifixion suffers the punishment of human sin and pays the price of human death.

And He blesses us by marking us with His blood. The poor in spirit, persecuted, and peacemaking of Jesus arrays us in honor and glory. His mourning, merciful, and meek covers us in royalty and dignity. Jesus hems the stray strands of our death into rest, and serges rest into resurrection, and bastes resurrection into breath. The rite of Holy Baptism anoints us with His privilege, and by the sacrament of Holy Communion, we ingest His status. The blood, the breath, the life, the sanctity of God’s Son pulses in our chests and presses through our vessels, yours and mine and his and hers and theirs. It revives, it rebirths, it swaddles and suckles us into an

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 "Blessed For Life"

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

lutheransforlife.org

unconditional acceptance that neither requests nor requires anything He Himself doesn't also already attire us with.

You don't throw on blessed. You slip into beatitude. He arrays you, and He adorns you. Poor in spirit only seems empty in the instant. Our Lord's eternity cloaks us with a kingdom too big to behold just now. Mourning and meek only feels naked this minute. His constant presence robes us under a comfort we get to grow into and an inheritance we never grow out of. Thirsting and merciful only appears weathered for the current time. Across life's duration, He veils us in a righteous richer and a satisfying realer than we can experience all at once. Pure in heart, peacemaking, and persecuted only come across as threadbare momentarily. Permanently we adjust in gentleness to the sight of this Savior and Father, and we gradually accustom to the designation of daughters and sons. Embryo only strikes us as pitiful and old age only strikes us as pathetic if we peek at the passing. When we look to the lasting, the reward of Jesus consumes our comparing and shortcoming rather than the other way around.

Believe it because it's hidden. Have it because it's given. Let the humility be this honest and the repentance this absolute. Blessed are you who have nothing but faith, which means room enough to receive, for you already embrace the overflowing abundance of divine and heavenly grace. You are not only blessed by someone greater but blessed for something greater. Blessed represents an adjective and also a verb. Jesus is beatifying you to beautify this people and this planet. In every battle view a beauty, and in every conflict find a courage. In every poverty encounter a compassion, and in every persecution perceive a proclamation. In every hurt, every work, every concern, lay eyes on a responsibility, and in every grief see a relationship. In every lack and loss, recognize an opportunity, and in every need and nakedness observe a purpose. In

Life Sunday 2023

Matthew 5:1-12 “Blessed For Life”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life
lutheransforlife.org

every mistake and failure—even abortions and assisted suicides—identify grace and forgiveness.

And in every human being—even unborn or impaired ones—encounter a neighbor, and in every neighbor a gift and privilege. So shall we serve as Lutherans For Life and celebrate as blessed for life! Amen.