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Sermon 4th Sunday of Epiphany

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“What if the beatitudes aren’t about a list of conditions we should try and meet to be blessed. What if these are not virtues we should aspire to but what if Jesus saying blessed are the meek is not instructive– what if it’s performative? ...meaning the pronouncement of blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself. Maybe the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus’ seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him especially that which society doesn’t seem to have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance. So maybe Jesus is actually just blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, come on, doesn’t that just sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?” Nadia Bolz Weber wrote that.

And I say what if the blessing was even more extravagant. What if we are all blessed. All the time. Are we not blessed with clean air to breathe? Are we not blessed with a church community who we can freely worship with? Are we not blessed to be living where at the moment there are no bombs falling on the rooves of our homes nor floods washing away all that we have, our means of making a living, members of our families... Are we not blessed by the Cedar trees and the Doug Firs, the Arbutus and the Garry Oaks? Are we not blessed to be able to sing together, to reach out and touch each other, to speak freely whatever we are thinking, to have enough to eat and clean water flowing out of our taps? Yes. We can only say yes. We are blessed.

Blessings surround us all the time. It’s as if there were angels sent by God, circling the room, brushing our cheeks, our foreheads, our shoulders with their wing tips. It’s just like in Psalm 91 the essential truth is this: “For You have sent your angels to watch over me, to guide me in all my ways. On their hands, they will bear me up lest I dash my foot against a stone.”

In the words of the Gospel song, There Are Angels Hov’ring Round, “There are sinners coming home. Jesus calls them home” All the sinners are coming home cause Jesus calls them home. What an amazing blessing! No matter how much we think we’ve fallen short, no matter how flawed we find ourselves, no matter how small-hearted we’ve ever been... Jesus is calling us home. Home to live in and with the Spirit of Life and Truth. The implications of this are so comprehensive, so all encompassing, so rooted in God’s generosity. They can be life-changing – if we let them.

The mediaeval mystic, Catherine of Sienna, says, *All the way to heaven is heaven, because you said, “I am the way.”* Jesus tells us he is the way and the truth and the life. It’s pretty straightforward. But sometimes we have a hard time believing that, don’t we. That Jesus is the way and the truth and the life and thus the way we take to follow him, the entire journey to heaven IS heaven. Already. Right here, right now. We are so blessed.

And that's what Jesus is telling the people as he speaks to them – and to us – in this morning's gospel, this morning's story, of what Jesus did while he was on earth. Speaking to the ones who are most often left out, forgotten, excluded, he tells them: YOU are blessed. God does not forget you, exclude you, leave you out. You are beloved, you are precious, you are blessed.

But this is a two-part story. It's not just about us receiving blessings. It's also about us passing the blessings on. My friend Suzanne responds to Catherine of Sienna's wisdom about all the way to heaven being heaven... "As I strive to live into the Christ life," Suzanne writes, "I taste heaven at each increment of grace, and, I hope and pray, I inadvertently let loose a little of paradise into the world, even if I'm not conscious of either receiving or giving." Which is what Jesus hopes, prays, calls us to do. As he does. To bless those who are difficult, challenging, disreputable. Maybe we simply start with remembering or recognizing that the ones whose lives seem most disastrous are the ones Jesus blesses first. The ones whose lives are rough around the edges, melting in the middle, or simply a red hot mess all the time. The first to be blessed. And we are called to join in. First to stretch our hearts open and receive the blessings. And then to lavishly spread the blessings round wherever we go. Just do it – that's why we're here on earth. To grow into our capacity to receive the blessings, to know we're worthy, and then to understand everyone else is worthy too and go do exactly that. Bless them. Amen.