

August 27, 2017
Bless To Me
Part 5- Moments of Struggle

I. Hidden God Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

So if Blessing is the continual presence of God with us in the world, then where is there that God is *not* present? What circumstance can you imagine that God is hidden or absent from our experience? Is this your understanding and experience of God in the world? How does this idea of blessing challenge your understanding of God during time of struggle and challenge?

I think there are many people who might be ok with this whole idea of blessing in the Celtic tradition, until it starts to challenge their own experiences. It is really nice to think about God being in and a part of all things in creation, and it can be a real comfort to know that God is always present with us, caring about us, and participating with us the world we live in. All of this is terrific, in theory, right? Until it's not.

What about Auschwitz? What about Charlottesville? What about Sandy Hook or San Bernadino? What about New York on 9-11? What does your experience and understanding of these events tell you about God's presence? Would you say, that at best, if God was there, God was at least hidden? And if God is there in those most challenging of times, why did those events happen at all? How is God, God, if God does not stop bad things from happening to good people?

Our own personal struggles often keep us from fully trusting in the reality of this whole Celtic understanding of blessing. For those of us who grieve the loss of a loved one; For those who have suffered the pain of divorce, depression, or severe loneliness in our lives, how does this ongoing presence of God idea sit with our realities? Do you feel God's presence in these moments?

When I was a child, I remember asking my mother about the loss of her own mother at the age of 7 and what that was like for her. She doesn't remember her mother much at all, and her story following the death of her mother was very much like the story of Cinderella, minus the Prince and the glass slipper! Her father was in the military and was often away from home. For the first few years after her mother's death, she went to live with her Grandmother and Grandfather, who raised her with the help of her Aunts and cousins who lived nearby. She remembers missing her mother, mostly at times when her friends had special times with their mothers and she could not. A couple of years later her father remarried a woman in a different state and she was moved away from her extended family. She went to a place where she knew no one and lived with a not-so compassionate step-mother and step-sisters with whom she was never close. Because her father was gone from home much of the time, she had no one to turn to when she wished to appeal any judgments or disciplines handed out as a response to her behavior. She speaks of feeling alone and abandoned for much of her adolescence. She didn't have to sleep in a closet under the stairs like Harry Potter, but she does not hold happy memories of her childhood.

Another woman I know has suffered one loss after another in her dreams of what she hoped her life would become. She was married young, and gave birth to a son and a daughter. She felt her life was ideal, until it was not. She was divorced and abandoned by her fairy tale prince of a husband before her oldest child reached age 3. She was left to raise the children on her own with no training or source of income. Her family sympathized with her situation but did not have the resources to be of much support for her or her children. She worked two minimum wage jobs to support her family and pay her way through community college one class at a time. Eventually she graduated and moved herself and her children into student housing while she attended graduate school. She continued to work to support her family during her studies and finally found another love in her life. She married a second time. After graduation she and

her new husband and children moved to yet another state to follow a job opportunity for him. She was forced to accept a lower paying job for herself, since it was all that was available to her in the small town where they relocated. Within a year and a half the marriage had deteriorated and the second husband left her and her children to fend for themselves, again. She made enough on her salary to get by, but it was not the life she imagined and she always felt that she had failed her children by not being able to provide better opportunities for them. Eventually things started to turn around again as her kids grew and they received scholarships for their college education. For a brief shiny moment, things were looking up. Within the year she was diagnosed with a debilitating disease that would force her into early retirement on disability pay. Her health would never improve, and now her children are caring for her. Not quite the fairy tale dream life she had envisioned in her youth.

And these women – they are the *privileged* class in the world. Auschwitz – this was God’s *chosen* people. We all have struggles in our lives that make us doubt this concept of God’s presence and participation in our lives. If blessing is real, how do we experience God in these times of struggle and loss? How do we reconcile our expectations that if God is on our side and fighting for us, how could life get so screwed up? Why is there pain? Why is there loss? If God is God, can’t God fix these things so we wouldn’t have to struggle? Isn’t that what it means that God participates with us in our lives?

In our gospel reading from Matthew, you hear Jesus speaking to the disciples and the people who had gathered to listen:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

How does this work exactly? How are we blessed in the midst of our mourning? How is being meek a blessing? How are those who are pure in heart, able to see God? What about those of us who are not so pure? And what does purity even mean or entail? Is there a rulebook somewhere to guide our actions in the world to be assured of God’s presence with us? My mother was poor in Spirit when she lost her mother, but having to live with a not-so-compassionate step-family surely didn’t seem like living in the promised Kingdom of Heaven. Someone who seems to continually make bad choices and suffering the consequences of those choices seems like a person who stands meek before the world. Yet they do not often feel like they have inherited the earth. Instead, in this case, she received a debilitating disease. Is this whole blessing thing a big joke played on the people gullible enough to believe it? Or is there something we are missing here? How could God’s obvious hiddenness in these moments ever be construed as blessing?

Music Offering

As our music plays I’m asking for you to think about situations in your own experience where God seemed most absent or hidden? How did you respond in those moments?

II. God Revealed

Reading: **Kahlil Gibran “On Death”**

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;

And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.

Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour.
Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?
Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?
For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?
And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?
Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

I think the key to this whole idea of blessing, as the Celts understand it, is not so much in the redefining of the word *blessing*, but rather in the redefining of what or who we think *God* is. My experience tells me that many people think a God who loves us and participates with us in our daily lives is someone who makes life easier. God is thought to be the almighty one who can sweep into our lives and give us parking spaces just when we need them most, or allows us to be that small percentage of people who do not die from a fatal disease. God brings us the perfect spouse, if we pray for one. And God rewards us when we do things the right way. These rewards are the things we call *blessing*. How often have you heard the phrase “Things are really good right now, we’ve been blessed”? But what about the people who don’t have it so good right now? What about the children trapped beneath the rubble of bombed out buildings in Syria – what have they done so wrong in their short lives that they deserve such consequences? Certainly a participatory, loving and merciful God would spare them from the sins of their parents, right? Does this god sound loving and merciful to you? And if this is what love and mercy mean to god, do you really want this god to be a participant in your life?

Let us look to the gospel once more to rethink our understanding of God. What does Jesus tell his listeners about how God creates in the world?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

For this gospel writer, *God* resides in the Kingdom of Heaven. So when you are poor in spirit, God is with you. When you mourn, you are comforted. When you are meek you are able to see the treasures of the earth around you. When you seek righteousness, God is there with you and you are filled. When you are merciful you are able to receive mercy from those around you, including God who is ever-present with you.

The beatitudes are not prescriptions for how to live your life. They are not telling you what to do or how to behave. Rather, they are the arrows, or signs, that point to where God is already present in the world. They are the markers to look for in your seeking God.

God is not some created notion that is hidden from us now, only to be revealed at some future point. In the beatitudes Jesus is telling us that God is present with us *NOW*, in everything. God is with us in our joys and God is with us in our sorrow. Good and bad are in the very nature of life. Bad things will happen. But so do the good things. And through it all, we are surrounded and embraced by God. This does not mean

that bad things won't happen to us, but rather that we are not alone when they do. God is with us, facing the struggles and the darkness with us, so that the darkness does not overcome us. Because God participates in our lives, all the bad choices we make, all the terrible actions we take against one another, are not the things that define us. God guides us through the darkness, the struggles and injustice, and ever encourages us to seek the light, the grace and the mercy that is always as close as our next breath.

This is a participatory God. Not a god that rigs the game so that only some of us privileged folks have even a chance at winning. But rather, God guides us outside our concepts of winning and losing and leads us into a field of wonder and peace. Heaven is always available. Heaven is always with us. Do we have eyes to see? Are we listening for guidance? Are we hungering and thirsting for a relationship with God? Jesus tells us that our illusions of heaven are missing the mark and causing us to sin, to separate ourselves from those relationships that bring us joy and fulfillment. We need to rethink how we understand our God and our lives with one another. We need to be seeking a much bigger life than that of simply winning and losing.

Heaven is waiting. We are blessed. *All* of us. *All* the time. God is constantly participating with us, providing opportunities for us to see the heaven in which we are immersed. What is keeping us from participating with God?

Reading: **Everything is Waiting for You — David Whyte**

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.
Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

Amen.

Musical Offering