

A woman with long brown hair is seen from the back, holding a large bouquet of vibrant pink peonies. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and blue, suggesting an outdoor setting. The image is framed by a thin white border.

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BLESSING

Well, it seems a folly to be preaching about blessing in the midst of the chaos of the world. None of us are immune to the headlines that war is raging now in Iran, and Lebanon, and Israel, and Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and subsequently many countries in the Middle East. Threats of the use of lethal force and unconditional surrender make us wonder if this rogue administration will use the kind of force that destroys all life. And additionally, does it from some misplaced Christian theological position that looks a lot like end times theology?

I dare say we are living in more interesting times than most of us desire. And yet we wake each day and face it with our varied levels of courage and fear, I know. And blessing is far from our minds these days, but maybe it shouldn't be. Maybe it's exactly what should be on our minds. "Amen," says the baby.

So I want to begin with a story from the late evangelical preacher, Tony Campolo, where he talks about a time when he was asked to speak at a Christian college. Tony was a Red Letter Christian, which means that he focused on the teachings of Jesus, the Red Letters in the Bibles that are highlighted by scholars. There aren't terribly many of those words in the Bible scholars say that Jesus actually said. Tony said, like we say, we should focus on that Jesus rather than the many Jesus' that are preached about these days.

In this story, he remembered that before a worship service at this Christian college where he was speaking, eight men had him kneel so that he could place their hands on his head and pray. He was glad to have the prayer, he said, but each of them prayed a long time. And the longer they prayed, the more they pushed on his head. Interestingly, one of the men, he said, didn't even pray for Tony. He

prayed for a neighbor. He said, "Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stulfutz. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. You know the trailer, Lord, just down the road on the right-hand side." Tony recalls that he wanted to interrupt and tell the man that God already knew where the guy lived and didn't need directions, but he remained silent and just tried to keep his head upright.

The prayer went on, "Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together." The prayer time ended and Tony went to speak and things went well. And after the service, Tony was headed home and he saw hitchhiker and he felt strongly compelled to pick him up. Tony said, "We drove a few minutes in silence and then I said, 'My name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?' And he said, 'My name's Charlie Stulfutz.'" Tony got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. And after a few minutes, Charlie said, "Hey, Mr. Where are you taking me?" To which Tony replied, "I'm taking you home." And Charlie narrowed his eyes and said, "Why?" And Tony answered, "Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?"

Charlie was shocked, and leaning against the door as if he was going to jump out because he had never seen Tony before. And then Tony really freaked him out when he drove right up to the silver trailer. When Tony pulled up, Charlie's eyes bulged out and he asked, "How did you know where I lived?" Tony said, "God told me." I tell you this story, not only because I love it's turning, but because of its blessing. It isn't what you think when you think what blessing means.

Blessing in the traditional sense is the bestowing of a beneficent power and vitality of who you are, but something also of the life giving power of God in whose name the blessing is given. We throw it around like God bless you, when someone sneezes. I doubt most of you have been asked to bless things like people sometimes ask me. Thanksgiving turkeys, a newborn baby, a dedication plaque on a building. I have blessed all those things and have no special power to bless any more than you do, except maybe I believe it more.

For me to bless is to acknowledge, to hold an esteem, to pause for a moment on what matters. What blessing occurred in that car between Tony Campolo and Charlie was that the world aligned to give Tony the opportunity to make a difference in the man's life, at least to challenge his cowardice and point him in a direction of responsibility and healing. And the blessing had happened hours before in the prayer, when the man praying revealed the need to Tony of his neighbor. Take away the coincidence of the story and you have blessing.

Let me say some more. I told you once about a man in my congregation in Boston. Some would call him a developmentally challenged man. He would shuffle into worship, dragging his too-long trousers on the stone floor all the way down the aisle to the front pew, late as ever during the opening prayer. He sang louder and more off-key than anyone in the church, and his name was Joe. We only knew his first name.

He was so far from the Beacon Hill Boston Brahman types that attended the church that I served that no one could avoid him. He smiled his toothless grin at the members of the church as they turned

away and were listening to stories of Jesus blessing the leper. Every Sunday, he came out of church and he stopped and said to me, "Father, bless me today." And he stood there with his eyes closed until I blessed him. The crowd, patiently waiting in line to give me a critique or two of the sermon, and there was Joe, "Bless me, Father."

And I would put my hand on his head and say, "Bless you, Joe. God bless you." And he would smile and he would thank me and he would shuffle out into the city. I blessed him every Sunday until my last Sunday in that church so many years ago when he came out of worship that day, that last Sunday I served. Before he could say anything, I said, "Joe, bless me today." Without hesitation, he put his hand on my forehead and he said, "God, bless Daniel today." And I smiled at him and thanked him and he shuffled out into the city.

That was the best sendoff from Boston I had from my stiff and formal congregation. I carry that blessing today, a stronger, more loving act than any of my upwardly mobile Bostonian church members could ever muster. And I've asked myself many times why that blessing meant so much. And I think part of the answer is that it came from a genuine place of love without hesitation born in keeping up appearances or haughty ideas about who has the power to bless and who doesn't. I think it came from something like that Jesus points out in the familiar Beatitudes over and over again, that blessing isn't life without struggle or pain. It isn't about carefree vacations in the Caribbean or riches that come down to us from our family or from hard work, but rather blessings are the acknowledgement that life is a mess, that it's painful to be human, that we lose more than we win, that we die, that we are ashamed sometimes, that when we break, we can also rebind our hearts, that we can be pushed in new ways to see the world by others.

Blessings come to those who know what life is about in the here and the now, not to those who live in some future time or place. And they come when we acknowledge that most of us pedal pretty hard to avoid going in the direction of the people named in Jesus' Beatitudes. We read books that promise to enrich our spirits. We find all kinds of ways to sedate our mournfulness. We dress up our pain so that no one can see it. We choose despair when we see the world, because our short term outlook forgets the long term or the long line of struggles that led to us and led to us being able to sit here in this congregation so peacefully right now.

According to Jesus, the blessings of the kingdom are available here and now. The first words out of Jesus' mouth are not, "Blessed shall be," but, "Blessed are." "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he says, not because something that will happen to them later, but because of their poverty and how it opens them up in the here and now. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, not because God is going to fill them up later, but because their appetites are so fine-tuned right now that they and we know what it feels like to see unrighteous acts of those in power or those around us.

The preacher and once my teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, says of these Beatitudes, "When people who can't stop crying hear Jesus call them blessed, right in the basement of their grief, they realize this isn't something they are supposed to get over soon. They realize that this is what it looks like to have a blessed and broken heart." This is what the Beatitudes have to do with your life, friends. They

describe a view of reality in which the least likely candidates are revealed to be extremely fortunate in the divine economy of things, not only later, but right now.

Now, whatever you believe about Jesus or these sayings, they are trying to point out to us something that you might believe about your life, that the things that seem to be going the most wrong for you may in fact be the things that are going most right. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to fix them. It just means that they may need blessing as much as they need fixing, since the blessing is already right there.

How can this be true? In my reading, the Beatitudes are really two part instructions in paying attention to life. Blessed are those who mourn our meek, thirst for righteousness and our poor in spirit is the first part of the Beatitudes, because nothing sharpens life more than when we feel these ways. Nothing makes us pay more attention than when we understand that nothing is a given, that nothing is easy and nothing has to be defended, protected, or hidden in your life, not your role or your reputation or your wealth or your status, because it's all transient. And that's the first part of the Beatitudes.

And the second part is a reminder that the instructions in how we are further blessed and how we can bless those in our lives is right there. Blessed are the merciful peacemakers, pure in heart, and those who can absorb words of persecution without being broken by them, because there is a grounding in you that you can return joy with anger, something stronger, more resilient in your life when you are attacked. In my best days, I can do this. Honestly, I don't do it all the time. Yet all these things are why the blessing from Joe, which I received almost 25 years ago, stays in my heart.

He had nothing but the few possessions in his torn pockets and his scrappy plastic bag. What he gave the world was not scorn, but love and joy in the form of his toothless smile and his loud, out of tune singing of the hymns and his deep faith that God held him no matter what happened. When he knew to put his hand on my head and bless me, I knew something holy happened, that from nothing came a blessing, that out of life's struggles came care, that from the depths of the ground floor of life came a sharpened awareness that what we do and say matters, how we hold one another matters, that small acts of kindness and service are part of a marathon, not a sprint of humanity.

And what matters is not that we protect ourselves with wealth and comfort, but that we share with one another the joy of life like a toothless grin and closed eyes for a blessing from one another. Those blessings come in many forms and our seldom born of our anxiety or worries about the world. So just in case this isn't landing for you, all I'm really saying is that the act of blessing is an act of seeing. Maybe like turning to Charlie named in the prayer, an act of kindness by Tony Campolo on that road.

Maybe to bless is to look at the world with great intention and love. To bless is to witness the world, even the things that we want to turn away from. To bless is to recognize holiness and where it resides. But above all to bless is to see, and that is the task before us today. To be like the woman in Alicia Ostriker's poem, to work so hard, God's love washes right through us. Today is a day of blessings,

friends, because we woke up, because we're here, because we can see one another, because we can bless each other with kind words and actions. You get what I'm saying?

Now, just to put a fine point on this, I'm not ending this sermon so you can clap for it. And I'm not ending it in song so that we can forget the important parts of what I just said. I'd like to end it in prayer with you praying with me, the work of blessing, moving through the Beatitudes together. I want to end with a prayer of us practicing blessing others. So with each separate Beatitude I speak, I want you to think of someone who fits that description in your life or in the world. Use your imagination or conjure someone who needs you right now. I want you to think about that person, to hold them in your heart and practice this act of seeing as blessing.

It might not be perfect. We might not see the entirety of who this person is or these people are, but at least it's a start. So I invite you to do this prayerfully with me, to join as I pray, Beatitude, conjure in your mind, person or people in the world who fit this description and need your blessing. Let us join together in prayer.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Think of someone who is worn down, discouraged, or depressed today. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are those who mourn. Think of someone who has loved, lost a loved one. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are the meek. Think of someone who is quiet, whose presence sometimes slips your notice.

God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Think of someone who has been denied justice for too long. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are the merciful. Think of someone who has not returned evil for evil, but has instead been able to forgive. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are the pure in heart. Think of someone who is straightforward, honest, and kind.

God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed other peacemakers. Think of someone who is trying to make peace in this world that is so full of conflict and violence. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Think of someone whose integrity has cost them something dear. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of love, see us, and give us eyes to see. May the ways that we look for holiness in the world around us change the ways that we live. May the ways that we look for holiness in other people, draw us closer to them and to you. And may our lives be blessings today and always. Amen.

