

Have a Blessed Day

Matthew 5:1-12

March 23 2014

You've heard me tell stories about this up here before, so it will not come as news to you that I love chatting on the phone with people I don't know. Customer service calls, sales calls, people needing money for public radio, whoever it is, I always like striking up conversation. It's real people on the other end, after all. I've been particularly conscious of being friendly ever since my 2009 trip to India, when one of the young men we'd supported as a student told me with great enthusiasm about the new job he'd gotten, in a call center. He had spent the past week in a training seminar on how to perfect an American accent, and he wanted to show it off to me. It was good. His job was to sell timeshares in Hilton Head, and he'd been told that he should have a good American-sounding name to use when he called. He'd picked the one that he knew best: David Rowe. "Hi," he said, "This is David Rowe. Wouldn't you like to be in the sunny South right now?"

So ever since then, I've been very conscious of the fact that it could be someone like my friend Nagaraj on the other end of the line, one more reason to be friendly. Plus, it's just fun to get a good conversation going.

Which is why this week's phone calls were really pretty disappointing. On Tuesday, after everyone else had left the church office, the phone rang. "Hello," said a man's voice, "I'd like to talk to the person who handles your electric bills." "Oh," I said, "actually, being a church, most of our key people are volunteers, without regular office hours." There was a pause. "May I speak to him?" said the voice. I thought he hadn't understood, so I tried to be more detailed. "It's a church," I said, "and it's Congregational, which means that really everything important is decided by the congregation, kind of cool, not by me or another staffer." Pause. "May I speak to him?" said the voice. Suddenly I realized. This was one of those robot calls I've been hearing about. "Wait a minute," I said, "You're not human, are you?" There was a pause. "No" said the voice. Which, I got to tell you, was actually a little eery. So much for my mantra of remembering that these are *real* people. He wasn't.

He called back, by the way, repeatedly, since the church office has four lines. And in what was probably a questionable use of my time, I answered each time. I started making up names of people who handled our UI bills, and then pretending to transfer the call, and putting on funny voices to keep the conversation going as long as I could.

A couple days later, I had a long, really long chat, with a real person, about a real issue I'd had with something that I'd paid for that hadn't showed up. And I tried, I tried so hard to engage in some good conversation, "must be a tough job," I said, "how's the weather," I said, anything. It just didn't go anywhere. I finally realized that it was because she was reading off a script in front of her, which was only marginally better than talking to the robot. To everything I said, she responded "it's our pleasure to help you." And after a 19 minute conversation that was really quite disappointing, this is what she read to me off the script. "We thank you for choosing us, Miss Ward. Now, have a blessed day."

I hung up and thought about that. This was a watershed moment, I realized. "Have a blessed day" had now made it into the **script** which a customer service rep had been given to use. And this wasn't a religious supply store or anything, she didn't know I was clergy. So I figure it's only a matter of time before the **robot** voice *also* concludes by wishing me a blessed day.

Now I'll tell the truth -- I always kind of like being wished a blessed day, which seems to have been happening more and more. It feels better than just being instructed to have a **nice** day.

But what does it mean? If you wish someone a *blessed* day, what are you wishing them? A super-nice day? In other words -- bigger picture here -- what does it mean to be blessed? When we say -- which, more and more we say this too -- when we say "Feeling blessed," what does it mean?

Church member Pam Badger sent me a really interesting article this week. A guy named Scott Dannemiller posted it on his blog a couple weeks ago, and it got picked up by the Huffington Post online, and now it's flying around. Dannemiller served as a

Presbyterian missionary in Guatemala, now he and his family are back Stateside. And he said this -- very provocatively -- he says American Christians should stop saying **blessed** so much. "There's a trend among Christians," he writes, "myself included, and it troubles me. More and more, our response to material windfalls is to call ourselves blessed. This new car is such a blessing. Best year yet for my business, feeling blessed."

This has to stop, says Dannemiller. And this is why, he says: "If we say that our material acquisitions are the result of God's blessing, then it makes God some kind of wish-granting fairy who bestows cars and cash on his followers. And worse, calling myself blessed because of material good fortune is offensive to the millions of *faithful* people in this world who don't have anything, who are just barely able to feed their families, or can't. It's like we're telling them, just try harder, and maybe God will bless you too."

That's what he says. It does make you go 'hmmm'. I've been thinking about this article ever since Pam gave it to me to read -- and ever since the customer service lady this week wished me a blessed day.

In fact, it's the second piece I've read recently that cautioned against how we use the word 'blessed.' The other piece was a little morning devotional that I know some of you read too; there's a bunch of us in this church who subscribe to a daily emailed devotional called Still Speaking, and it was one of those. A pastor named Molly Baskette, up in Boston, wrote about hopping on her tandem bike to go pick up her daughter from school nearby -- her daughter always rode home on the back part, it was their fun ritual each day. And on the way **to** the school to get her daughter, the linchpin holding the tandem part came loose, and the bike fell apart in a busy intersection. Molly was fine. But what if, she realized, what if it had been five minutes later, after she'd picked up her daughter, when her daughter would have been on the part that fell off. And what her devotional piece was about was: since the linchpin fell out then and **not** five minutes later, should she say she was blessed? "I realized" she said "how easy it is to chalk up everything that goes our way to God's blessing. The near miss. The good weather on vacation. The raise."

"But what about," she said, "the people who sit in the rain their whole vacation long, their whole life long? What about the mother whose child was sitting on the tandem bike when the linchpin came loose? Has God chosen not to bless them?"

"I don't believe in that kind of God," she wrote. "I'll bet you don't either."

What to do then? What to say? Here's what Molly Baskette says: "I silently thank God for **everything** good that comes my way. And out loud, I don't give thanks that God has blessed **me**. I give thanks that **I** get to bless God, no matter what is going on."

And here's what that other writer, Scott Dannemiller, concluded: "My prayer today is that I understand my **true** blessing. It's not my house, or my job, or my standard of living. No. My blessing is this. I know a God who gives hope to the hopeless. I know a God who loves the unlovable. And now my response, always, is simply "I'm grateful."" I'm grateful.

Truth is, Jesus had a good bit to say about being blessed. And these writers are right, what he said about being blessed had nothing to do with winning the lottery, or getting a raise, or dodging misfortune. Or about what I discovered on Twitter yesterday, when, out of curiosity, I ran a search on the hashtag 'blessed'. Among the first tweets I saw were, "Had the best mac and cheese I've ever eaten today. #Blessed" and "My hubby and I got a couples mani-pedi today. #Blessed."

Jesus said that feeling blessed, being blessed, is not about pedicures, mac and cheese, or stuff in general. Jesus was actually pretty clear on what he meant by 'Have a Blessed Day'. Here's what he said, the words that Anne read to you just a few minutes ago, the words that have come to be known as the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the meek, and the poor in spirit."

What Jesus was saying is that feeling blessed isn't something that you have to wait for. You don't have to wait to have a really good day, to have everything break your

way, or have an awesome mani-pedi. You don't have to narrowly escape something terrible to be blessed.

You may be in the midst of a not-so-good day, you may in fact be dealing with something terrible. But you can have a blessed day, by **living** the blessing Jesus offers in his words. You can have a blessed day by **being** a blessing -- by choosing to live as a person who creates peace with others, who shows mercy, who seeks to live with honesty and integrity, righteousness, who is gentle in spirit.

So what, in the end, does it mean to have a blessed day? It doesn't actually mean getting the parking spot right in front of the restaurant, or the last pair of shoes on sale in your size, or being the winning bid on the silent auction at the Appalachia fundraiser, although those are all truly awesome things.

Having a blessed day means a day lived with kindness, and humility. It means living as a person who seeks peace, who makes peace. And it means living gratefully, saying thank you over and over and over again for all that is good, for every moment when you feel God's nearness, for everything in your life that has brought you comfort, brought you peace, brought you joy.

I'll close by sharing a conversation I had with someone in this church, not all that long ago. She was talking to me on a day that that no one in their right mind would call a blessed day, because she was dealing with a great sorrow and impending loss, and the earth was cracking open beneath her feet. But she wasn't talking about any of that. What she wanted to talk about was the kindness she had experienced, for which she was profoundly grateful. What she wanted to talk about was her own capacity for strength, which had surprised and delighted her. What she wanted to talk about was the joy she was finding in connection with people who loved her.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers. She was indeed having a blessed day. With a humility of spirit which awed me, and a gratitude that inspired me, she was having a blessed day. And by being with her, so was I.

Have a blessed day.
Amen.