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Allison Wordes

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April 10, 2020

Discovering the *Good* in Good Friday

Allison Wordes

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.

-Matthew 5

Flashback to February 26, Ash Wednesday. When the people of God could still gather in public to worship together without worrying about how far spit from a cough can travel.

All day, I felt the draw to attend an Ash Wednesday service. This is something I took part in with my family when I was younger, and I remembered the impact that it had on me then. Part of me wanted to search for that feeling again. Many churches have an Ash Wednesday service, so it was easy to find one at the church that I regularly attended; I dug out my van keys and drove to the 7 PM service.

I didn't know why I felt so drawn to go. But, as I walked back to my seat after receiving the mark of the cross on my forehead, I felt refreshed. The physical act of spreading ashes on my bare skin affected me in a strange and powerful way. I wore it proudly for my friends and roommates, answering their questions and letting them touch it. This was *good*. I am forgiven, and I am promised eternal life.

Later the same evening, I laid in the dark and tried to come up with something that I could give up for Lent. Many people give up something or other—I did a google search and there are some pretty wild suggestions out there, such as giving up your pillow, your Instagram, or chocolate chip cookies. I couldn't pinpoint any one thing, even after praying about it and talking about it. I even thought about writing letters to people who have impacted me or fighting abstract emotions like self-pity.

In the end, I didn't end up choosing to pursue anything, and proceeded with life as usual.

Then, out of the blue, pandemic hit. Now people are giving up all kinds of things they never even imagined that they would have to, like watching basketball or spending time with friends. The fact that so many things that were easily accessible before are just unavailable now leaves us wondering what God wants from us. For me, as a senior who doesn't get to walk across the stage in the presence of my family and friends, this is a hard question. To be honest, it sucks. I harbored the feeling of having been jipped. This could not be *good*.

Then I thought back to Ash Wednesday, when I had asked God what he wanted me to give up. I realized I had received my answer. Needless to say, it was not the answer I wanted to hear.

As I struggle to work through—with countless people around the world—what it means to live in this absence of busyness, I came to the passage of Matthew 5. Opening up my Bible to this chapter, I was struck by the relevance to my situation. I have rarely spent time with this sermon because it always seemed rather over-preached and felt a little

dry to me. However, this time it was like the lens of my viewpoint had focused, becoming sharper than before.

In giving his sermon on the mount, Jesus is talking to his disciples. Well-known theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about who these disciples are in context of Matthew 5:

He has called them, every one, and they have renounced everything at his call. Now they are living in privation, the poorest of the poor, the sorest afflicted, and the hungriest of the hungry. They have only him, and with him they have nothing, literally nothing in the world, but everything with and through God.¹

Right now, I am the opposite of strong, assured, or capable in my own abilities. Rather, I find myself in each of these phrases:

I am *poor in spirit*, spiritually searching for God and some—any—answers.

I am *mourning* the people and life I have to leave sooner than I anticipated.

I am *meek*, humbled by the lack of knowledge I have in a quickly changing society.

I am *hungry and thirsty for righteousness*, because I just want to do the next right thing, which at times seems impossible.

Weaker and more lost than I have ever been, I am just looking for some trace of *goodness*. When everything seems to be going wrong, I want to make it right. I want to tip back up what has been toppled. Each decision I make has so much weight, it seems. I need something tactile, like a black, crumbling cross on my forehead to remind me who I am.

And who am I? What can I strive to be right now?

I can be *merciful*, as well as open to receive mercy from those I interact with.

I can be *pure in heart*, like a child innocently searching in wonder for God to appear even in the most illogical circumstances.

I can be a *peacemaker*, knowing that I have a place in heaven as God's child and I don't have to fear conflict.

There is a sense of stress in the church right now because we can't all meet, like those long weeks ago on Ash Wednesday; however, instead of weakening our faith it should

reinforce our trust in what God is doing. I have prayed more, read my Bible more, and talked about my faith life more in the past few weeks than this entire semester so far.

What has this period taught me about stress and uncertainty? There have been lies, accusations, hurt, and fear. I have doubted myself, and my identity in Christ. Still, I am holding on to these promises:

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.

Art history has sent me back to see the full circle, back to the early Renaissance when the black plague affected the church. Instead of breaking it down, it strengthened their numbers. Artists, along with many people, instead of just surviving... began thriving. They found the joy in midst of the chaos, a beacon in the darkness.

As we come to Good Friday, the end of Lent and a recounting of Jesus' sufferings, I have to ask the question of "What is *Good*?" When nothing seems good, I think of how Jesus dealt with the lies, accusations, and deprivation that he experienced. I gave up going to the library. He gave up his dignity. I gave up in-person classes. He gave up his family and friends. I gave up going out to eat. He gave up his life.

A lot of this process of me crying injustice is really rather pitiable in comparison to the beautiful sacrifice that we see through Jesus. He whispers, "I know what you are going through. I know that it is not fun, and that you feel hurt. I know how you feel... because I've been there, too." Jesus has never been more real and close. He's seen the other side of the battle, because on Easter morning he fought his way through, and ultimately he won.

And I have never been more *blessed*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. "The Beatitudes." *The Cost of Discipleship*. Simon & Schuster, 1959. [↗](#)