

**Homily, St. Andrew's (8:00am)**  
**"Blessing of Backpacks", Sept 11, 2016**  
**Number 6:22-27; Matthew 5:1-12**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In the beginning, God created the world, and then God blessed it. Unlike other creation stories in the Ancient Near East that suggest that nature itself is sacred, in the biblical story of creation, God first creates, then God blesses. They are 2 separate acts. As one writer says: "The world is not divine but is here because God made it, and it has vitality because God blessed it." (*Occasional Services*, F3) The first moment of blessing came on Day 5 of creation when, after God created birds and sea creatures, the storyteller writes: "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply...'" (Gen 1:22) The second moment of blessing came the very next day when, after God created humankind, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'..." (Gen 1:28). The final act of blessing in those earliest days of the world came on the seventh day, after all the creative work was done and a day of rest brought creation to completion, and God blessed it to make it holy.

More than a gesture of goodwill and certainly more than a gateway to wealth or success, God's blessing is about full and overflowing life... abundant life... life that is fruitful and multiplies. We participate in this first and primary blessing through procreation and by embracing the responsibility God has given us for the world. As we care for creation, including caring for one another, we witness the vitality and power of God's blessing that brings fullness of life in the world. God's blessing gives a state of well-being... it is wholeness.

Unfortunately, the world and God's creatures in it haven't always stayed in that state of wholeness, of well-being, of blessedness, with which it began. So a little later in Genesis, God blesses Abraham and that blessing is a covenant. God promises to make a great nation of Abraham and the story of God and the people of God really get rolling. The story of our ancestors in faith has its ups and downs, moments when it seems God's blessing has been lost forever and moments when the unspeakable glory of God's blessing shines so brightly we cannot comprehend or look directly at it. The state of wholeness... the fullness and vitality of life that God created and blessed gets corrupted at times along the way and from time to time we need to be reminded of who we were created to be. From time to time we need to be reminded that God's dream for the world and for humanity doesn't follow the rules or systems or values we make. As human society has developed, we have come to think that it's those who are smart and strong, the rich and the beautiful, who get God's attention and God's interest. We think it's the winners who get or who have God's blessing. And so God sent Jesus to remind us of the teaching of the prophets of old. God sent Jesus to remind us that the kingdom of God turns everything upside down.

Today we hear the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins by reminding the gathered crowd about God's blessing... God original intent in creating the world and God's dream for how the world will be again one day. Jesus reminds us who it is that gets God's attention and God's interest: "Blessed are the poor in

spirit... blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek... blessed are those who seek to live in right relationship... blessed are the merciful... blessed are the pure in heart... blessed are those who work for peace... blessed are those who are hurt because they stand up for the ways of God... blessed are those follow God.” Nine avenues of blessedness for a single group of people. Nine signs of the kingdom in a community living in anticipation of the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God. These beatitudes don’t offer practical advice for successful living. They aren’t about individual ethics. Rather, the beatitudes “declare an objective reality as the result of a divine act, not subjective feelings... They do not directly lay down demands for conversion, but declare the ‘marks of the church.’” (NIB, 177) The reality to which the beatitudes point is an eschatological one... it is how it will be when God’s reign comes in all its fullness. In the meantime, Jesus tells us to watch for it; to work for it; to remember that the ways of God are not the ways of the world. The beatitudes effect what they say... they bring into being what they state... by reminding us to give thanks for life by offering blessing in return.

In the beginning, God blesses all of life and then gives humanity responsibility for the fullness, the wholeness and the vitality of the world. As we accept and live into this responsibility, we remind each other of our common participation in God’s original blessing by offering blessing to others: “fathers bless their sons, priests bless the congregation...” parents bless their children when they marry. (*Occasional Services*, F4) We bless one another as a sign of thanksgiving for God’s blessing and so every blessing has an element of eucharist in it... indeed, early Christians translated the Hebrew word for blessing into the Greek word for thanksgiving. Blessing and thanksgiving - perhaps they are things we should mix up. For every blessing helps us to see the world around us - the objects and the people - in their original state of fullness, wholeness and vitality. As an act of thanksgiving, every blessing helps us remember who we are created to be as beloved children of God.

A little later today we will bless objects to be used for holy purposes; we will bless people to mark their commitment to specific responsibilities. We bless tools we use for our everyday lives to remind us that everything we are and everything we have and everything we do comes from the holy hand of our Creator. We bless to remind ourselves of God’s vision of the world, and our lives, as sacramental... a window through which to see God. As we bless bread and wine in just a few minutes, asking God to fill us with every good thing, may we return such blessing to God in our thanksgiving for the gift of life, each and every day.