

Trinity UMC
May 8th, 2016
Easter Season: A Place to Belong
Always Blessed, Always Blessing

SCRIPTURE READING

Ephesians 1: 15-19

Rick

⁵ Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that ¹⁶ I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, ¹⁹ and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength.

READING OF THE GOSPEL

Luke 24: 44-53

Roberta

Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. ⁴⁶ He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ Look, I'm sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

⁵⁰ He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. ⁵² They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. ⁵³ And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

Prayer

For quite some time, I have used variations of the word “blessings” as a way to sign off in both email and written correspondence. “Blessings on the journey”--- Blessings on the Way---- Blessings of Christ... has been shortened to simply ‘Blessings’. In my study of Celtic Christianity as I studied as a spiritual director and then later in seminary, I was drawn to the very earthy Celtic understanding of blessing—blessings written down from an oral tradition that had to do with everyday life—such as the lighting of the hearth in the morning or the rising and setting of the sun. These blessings/ prayers/ sayings/ rituals were passed down in the Gaelic language from generations to generations. Many of those prayers and blessings would have been lost if not for Alexander Carmichael who compiled prayers, hymns, incantations, anecdotes, natural history observations and miscellaneous lore as he traveled through the Gaelic speaking regions of Scotland between 1860 and 1909. He compiled a large six volume sacred text now known as the Carmina Gadelica.

Contemporary Christian musician John Bell, from Iona Wild Goose Worship Resource book has adapted and put many of these blessings into song.

God to enfold you, Christ to uphold you,
Spirit to keep you in heaven’s sight;
So may God grace you, heal and embrace you,
Lead you through darkness into the light.

The act of asking for a blessing a thing or a person is not unique to the Christian tradition. There are blessing prayers from all the various religion traditions.

I wonder what words Jesus used as he blessed his followers on that hill the day of ascension that was our gospel reading this morning. Did he ‘wing it’ and say a new prayer or did he use the ancient blessing from the Hebrew text of Numbers? *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you: the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”*

The English word blessing is taken from the latin verb—benedicere, which means to speak well of—bene means ‘well’ and dicere means ‘to speak. So to bless someone or something is to speak well of that thing. When we bless through word, gesture, or ritual, in our Christian tradition we acknowledge the goodness that is there. We worship God as the creator of all—so as we become aware of all of God’s creation, we bless and thank God. So today, as we gather to bless a marriage, bless a prayer shawl, bless a backpack, bless a child, bless an animal, bless a person celebrating a birthday, we are ‘speaking’ well of whatever we are blessing.

The Roman Catholic late theologian Henri Nouwen wrote:

"To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or appreciation; it is more than pointing out someone's talents or good deeds; it is more than putting someone in the light. To give a blessing is to affirm, to say 'yes' to a person's Belovedness."

*God to enfold you, Christ to uphold you,
Spirit to keep you in heaven's sight;
So may God grace you, heal and embrace you,
Lead you through darkness into the light.*

With this understanding of blessing, I was taken back a month ago when I read an article in the New York times by Kate Bowlen called "*Death, Prosperity Gospel and me*". I admit that I was drawn to the article because she came from a similar background as me, a rural Mennonite community. Bowler wrote her doctoral dissertation on the history of the prosperity gospel and had recently released a book titled "Blessed" prior to her diagnosis with stage 4 cancer. The following is words:

I am a historian of the American prosperity gospel. Put simply, the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. I spent 10 years interviewing televangelists with spiritual formulas for how to earn God's miracle money. I held hands with people in wheelchairs being prayed for by celebrities known for their miracle touch. I sat in people's living rooms and heard about how they never would have dreamed of owning this home without the encouragement they heard on Sundays.¹

¹ Kate Bowler. *Death, The Prosperity Gospel and Me*. New York Times. Feb 13, 2016

In her article she asserts that the *“the prosperity gospel’s greatest triumphs is its popularization of the term “blessed.” Though it predated the prosperity gospel, particularly in the black church where “blessed” signified affirmation of God’s goodness, it was prosperity preachers who blanketed the airwaves with it. “Blessed” is the shorthand for the prosperity message. Over the last 10 years, “being blessed” has become a full-fledged American phenomenon.*

Blessed is a loaded term because it blurs the distinction between two very different categories: gift and reward. It can be a term of pure gratitude. “Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself.” But it can also imply that it was deserved. “Thank you, me. For being the kind of person who gets it right.”

Bowler’s writing made me wonder about my use of the term blessings to sign letters and emails. When I write about blessing, I am not using it as a term made popular through the prosperity gospel. When I read about blessings from scripture—about Job who lost everything yet blessed God, when I imagine Jesus blessing his followers at the ascension, I am attempting to communicate that all of life is blessing. All of the pain, all of the joy, all of the sorrow, all of the mess of ordinary life—all of it is blessing.

In our recent Rising Strong Women's retreat we focused on the understanding of 'wholeheartedness'. We looked at the messages from Scripture, such as the great commandment in which we are instructed to love God, love neighbor and love ourselves with our 'whole heart' as well as some themes from Brené Brown's most recent book, *Rising Strong*.

One of our sessions during the retreat was led by Jennifer. We were given puzzle pieces and she asked us a series of questions. We wrote our answers to the questions on our puzzle pieces and then eventually we put the pieces together to form a heart.

Living wholeheartedly, means that we need to claim our brokenness in order to rise strong into new life. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 51 that we are to return to God with a broken and contrite heart—brokenness is always a part of blessing. When we gather for Holy Communion we bless the bread and we break the bread- a symbol that all life is of God.

However, when we are in the very center of those broken places of our lives, we forget that we are not alone; we forget that we are all God's beloved. Our broken places are painful and yet we are an Easter people who proclaim in word that from brokenness, from death comes new life.

We need each other to remind us that in the midst of our brokenness, God is present, pouring out love and blessing onto those broken places.

Blessing one another is saying yes to the reality that God enfolds us, heals us, embraces us and leads us from darkness into light.

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Spirit to keep you in heaven's sight;
So may God grace you, heal and embrace you,
Lead you through darkness into the light.*

Anna Quindlen wrote a story about a number of children from New York City who were under the care of some Roman Catholic nuns. Their natural parents had either died or were not functional to take care of their children. One day, they all went on a field trip to the New Jersey shore. Many of the children experienced the sight and sounds of the ocean and the feel of the sandy beach for the very first time in their lives. After a morning of playing in the beach, they moved away to some shelter for lunch. After lunch they were climbing a sand dune to return to the ocean when one child exclaimed- "It's still here"!

For this young child, so many things had left him in his short life that to leave a place and then return and see that the ocean was still roaring, the sand was still ready to exploring, was amazing and he was filled with awe.

The followers of Jesus during the ascension—when after 40 days of walking and talking with the risen Jesus the Christ, he then disappeared

from them—kept looking up in the clouds—almost waiting for him to return. They had received his blessing, they had been instructed that they would receive power, that they were to go back to Jerusalem and wait and yet they kept standing looking up to the sky.

I learned this week about a Wood cut from created by the German artist Albrecht Durer from 1510. You may not be able to see it but if you look closely—not up into the sky but on the round earth at the center of the picture- there are imprints of two footprints. In the woodcut, you see only the partial view of an ascending Christ but right underneath- there are the two footprints on what looks like a world globe.

Are we like the disciples looking up to the clouds asking for blessing, rather than realizing that the spirit of Christ is “still here” just as the little boy exclaimed about the ocean. The Spirit is with us, walking with us, empowering us to walk and bless others.

Over the next few months, I will not be present with you in person but I will continue to walk with you in prayer. My prayer is that you will claim your brokenness, claim your blessedness, claim your belovedness and freely share that all with others. We are always blessed and always blessing.

Next Sunday you will gather in worship to remember the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This next season of Pentecost is a reminder that although we cannot see the Holy, that we are not alone--- as the little boy proclaimed about the ocean—the Spirit is still here!

Let us live with surprise and a sense of expectancy to discover the always blessing Creator, Christ and Spirit walking with us. This is my prayer of blessing for you until I return in August.

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