

Blessing

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
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Relationships are meant to be signs of God's love for humanity as a whole and each person in particular. —Henri Nouwen

Ancient Witness: Romans 12:9-14

“May you know that God blesses you.” I say this at the end of every worship service I do. It’s part of Aaron’s blessing in the Hebrew scriptures.

Today, I want to talk on the subject of blessing. It’s not something someone says to you after you sneeze. It’s not what you say before a meal. A blessing is not a thing; it’s not external. Rather, it’s internal; it’s a state of mind.

We often talk about certain external events or things or people as if there were blessings, but we do this because they correspond to certain changes that happen inside of us. We become more confident, secure, more caring, resilient, empathetic.

Because they are internal, we say that blessings sometimes come “in disguise.” A negative event can be part of a positive blessing! Or it may be the other way around; something positive may not be a blessing at all. More often than not, for example, people who win the lottery will eventually say that their lives actually become less happy and less fulfilling.

In his book, *Blessing: The Art and the Practice*, David Spangler said that blessing others is something we innately know how to do. A blessing comes from a loving and caring heart, but it is much more than kindness or praise. “A kindness gives us something, but a blessing *urges us to be something*,” he wrote.

The truth is, we often prefer kindnesses to blessings anyway. Kindnesses can be like pretty flowers growing in the sunny meadows of our lives, raising our spirits, making us thankful and happy. But blessings, like all things that arise from spirit, can take us from sunny meadows into dark caverns where we go deeper than we may have expected or wanted to go.

And so, a blessing has nothing to gain. It is egoless. It comes without reservation. It doesn’t expect a “thank you.” Like at the deathbed of a parent who says, “I love you and have always loved you.” It’s strong, healing stuff. The primary effect of a blessing is to liberate and expand our lives. The way that this happens is that blessings help us remember. Spangler wrote:

Blessing is a reminder of the love that lies at the core of us, waiting to become our blood and sinew, bone and tissue... blessings remind us that we are made of spirit stuff... and therefore kin to life and to each other.

What a blessing does is help us be aware that we are connected by something that is within us and between us. A blessing is an invitation from one person to another to enter into what Spangler called “the unobstructed world.” He said,

It's a condition in which we are so aware of our interrelatedness, our oneness, that every being acts on behalf of the well-being of all other beings.

The traditional Christian term for this condition is the Kingdom of God, a Realm that Jesus said was possible to enter in the here and now. It is a state of being, a dimension, that is right under our noses. It is a hidden wholeness, in which each finds its wholeness in the wholeness of others. It is to be alive to and recognize that everything “lives, moves and has its being” in God, “from whom *all blessings* flow.” And so the true source of all blessing is the Sacred Reality, the Intelligent and Creative Love, which permeates the entire universe.

In this Realm everyone wins or no one wins. It reminds me of the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva. This is a person who has achieved enlightenment, and being free from any need for rebirth, could pass into the mystery of nirvana. But instead, he or she stays in the world to help others in their quest for enlightenment, for he or she knows that until all are free, no one is.

And so, to live in this Kingdom, this hidden Sacred Reality, is to live in a world in which God's spirit of love and creativity circulates freely. And so when we bless others we feel God's spirit with and around us, and like a heart, we pump this spirit so it flows even more freely. To do this is to experience a joy beyond happiness and a delight beyond feeling.

Spangler said it well:

Blessing arises from a state of mind and heart that understands wholeness, that understands joy, that sees what is right rather than what is wrong.

We are getting at the very essence of the Divine—how God acts. For God does not act with judgment, vengeance, violence or intervening power. Rather, God acts by gently blessing, affirming, encouraging and loving. Jesus follows a God who sees what is right rather than what is wrong. To be blessed is to experience acceptance, affirmation and recognition, not at the surface but at the core of our being.

It is written that at his baptism, God's presence rested on Jesus like a hand rests on your shoulder. It blessed him saying, “You are my delightful son, my dear child.” This blessing bathed his spirit, enabling him to embrace life with courage and joy, even his own violent death.

I came across a story by Sister Helen Mroska that I want to share with you:

He was in the first third grade class I taught at Saint Mary's School in Morris, Minnesota. All of my students were dear to be, but Mark Edlund was one in a million. Very neat in appearance, but had that happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful. Mark talked incessantly. I had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was not acceptable. What impressed me so much, though, was his sincere response every time I had to correct him for misbehaving—“Thank you for correcting me, Sister!” I didn't know what to make of that at first, but before long I became accustomed to hearing it many times a day.

One morning my patience was growing thin when Mark talked once too often, and I made a novice-teacher's mistake. I looked at Mark and said, “If you say one more word, I am going

to tape your mouth shut!” It wasn’t ten seconds later when Chuck blurted out, “Mark is talking again.” I hadn’t asked any of the students to help me watch Mark, but since I had stated the punishment in front of the class, I had to act on it. I remember the scene as if it had occurred this morning. I walked to my desk, very deliberately opened my drawer and took out a roll of masking tape. Without saying a word, I proceeded to Mark’s desk, tore off two pieces of tape and made a big X with them over his mouth. I then returned to the front of the room. As I glanced at Mark to see how he was doing, he winked at me. That did it! I started laughing. The class cheered as I walked back to Mark’s desk, removed the tape and shrugged my shoulders. His first words were, “Thank you for correcting me, Sister.”

One Friday, things just didn’t feel right. We had worked on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were frowning, frustrated with themselves—and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then I told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed me the papers. Charlie smiled. Mark said, “Thank you for teaching me, Sister. Have a good weekend.” That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday, I gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. “Really?” I heard whispered. “I never knew that meant anything to anyone!” “I didn’t know others liked me so much!” No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn’t matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another again. That group of students moved on.

Several years later, after I returned from vacation, my parents met me at the airport. As we were driving home, Mother asked me the usual questions about the trip—the weather, my experiences in general. There was a lull in the conversation. Mother gave Dad a side-ways glance and simply said, “Dad?” My father cleared his throat as he usually did before something important. “The Eklunds called last night,” he began. “Really?” I said. “I haven’t heard from them in years. I wonder how Mark is.” Dad responded quietly. “Mark was killed in Vietnam,” he said. “The funeral is tomorrow, and his parents would like it if you could attend.” To this day I can still point to the exact spot on I-494 where Dad told me about Mark.

Why did it have to rain on the day of the funeral? It was difficult enough at the graveside. The pastor said the usual prayers, and the bugler played taps. One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin and sprinkled it with holy water. I was the last one to bless the coffin. As I stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as a pallbearer came up to me. “Were you Mark’s math teacher?” he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin. “Mark talked about you a lot,” he said.

After the funeral, most of Mark’s former classmates headed to Chuck’s farmhouse for lunch. Mark’s mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. “We want to show you something,” he father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. “They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it.” Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been folded and refolded

many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "As you can see, Mark treasured it." Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine, too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said without batting an eyelash. "I think we all saved our lists."

You know, in the Bible Jacob wrestled all night long with a mysterious stranger/angel in the darkness. Finally, he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go *unless you bless me.*" (Gen. 32:26) Like Jacob, we strive with both divine and human beings for a blessing.

Almost every culture has rich traditions of the important recognition and blessings of the younger members by the older members. This is seen as essential for development from early adulthood to later adulthood. Often this is ritualized, such as the elder's laying on of hands. Some present-day people are rediscovering the importance of the young honoring their elders and the power of the elders blessing and affirming the younger adults. A true blessing is strong medicine that heals and fortifies. It invigorates and encourages. It is a hand upon us that strengthens and sustains. Like a tattered note, we carry it with us, reminding us who we are.

May the power of God work through the affirmation and acceptance we show others. May the spirit work wonders as we see what is right rather than what is wrong. May we be points of remembrance and recognition. May the wholeness of God's spirit flow through us. And may we be practiced in the divine art of blessing.