

“Blessing”  
Genesis 12:1-4; Jeremiah 17:5-8;  
Romans 4:1-8; Luke 6:27-36

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We've been talking about how we live our lives and the struggles we have. One of the first struggles we talked about was what we say to each other and how that can sometimes cause problems. Then we thought about how we struggle with the truth or with what's real and sometimes want to shape the world to our own liking or to our own benefit. Then we have to deal with those mistakes, so one way of doing that is through something called forgiveness, a way of letting go of mistakes and looking forward to the possibilities. The act of forgiveness really holds a lot of weight. It's a great blessing. If you've been forgiven and recognize how that opens up a new possibility, you recognize what a blessing it is.

Yet, all blessings are not forgiveness. Blessing can be somebody encouraging you in a particular way, and you can say that was a blessing. You can think about the blessing of somebody speaking well of you. (That's the definition of the Hebrew word.) The idea is that you've been given a new possibility, a new opportunity. One of the ways it's defined in scripture is that it's like a tree being planted by a stream of water. You notice that the blessing is something some other entity does. The tree is not going to plant itself by water. The wind might do it, but the tree doesn't have the agency to do it on its own. It needs something else, just as we need somebody else to have an experience of blessing. The blessing, then, runs deep for it allows the tree to put its roots into the water. I think that's a wonderful metaphor for the idea of blessing—being planted by a stream of water, being planted where we'll be able to thrive, in some way connected to that which helps us thrive, and be, and live.

In the Old Testament, we hear the story of Jacob and Esau, and how important their father's blessing was. It opened up possibility in their futures. So I was just wondering, if you think about your own life, can you think of somebody in your life who was a blessing to you? Someone that somehow opened a door, planted you in a way that enabled you to have roots into something that was good? Maybe you were going in the wrong direction and they helped you find the right direction. There are all kinds of ways that somebody could have been a blessing. Who was a blessing in your life and how did they bless you? I think there's real value in taking a moment to think about our blessings and the people who created those blessings.

For me, I think back to when I was in college in Tulsa, Oklahoma. There was a man named Thad, who was the minister at the local ecumenical Campus Christian Center. It was called the Canterbury Center at that time. It was his welcome, his encouragement, his invitation into a world in which I was expected to think for myself and yet be loved as one of a community. He gave me a vision of what community could look like and what it's like to be part of a community of faith. He was one who was a blessing to me and in many ways was the one who solidified my connection through faith to the God who gives me grace. I'm recognizing for myself that blessing is not so much somebody to help me get material goods, but one who helps feed my soul, who gives me life.

There's another man, who was kind of an odd man in some ways. His name was Jim. He took this older seminary student into his small church in Rohnert Park, California because I requested it. I asked to come and work with him, to do my internship with him. And he listened. And he watched. And he reflected to me what he saw about who I was and what my calling was. And he encouraged me in my calling and helped plant me in my faith so that I might drink from the waters of the Spirit.

So those are a couple of people in my life who I think blessed me. But then I began to think about how I might turn that around. How might I become a blessing for others? I wonder why it sometimes seems as hard to do as it does. What are the things that are the roadblocks in my life that keep me from being a better person to be able to bless others?

Sometimes we point to our woundedness and our brokenness and how those wounds or brokenness can make it hard to bless somebody else. While I think there's truth in that, that there are places and ways that we have wounds and brokenness that sometimes make it hard for us to help others, I was reading an article this week that suggests that there's another reason we might find that we have a hard time blessing others. It's when we begin to be successful, when we begin this journey to have a lot of choices. We begin to see whether we're doing better than everybody else, and if we aren't we feel we are losing the competition. If we are, there's still somebody ahead of us.

The article talked about a fellow who was a multi-millionaire. He could have retired and been very comfortable, but was working himself to the bone because he didn't have ten million yet. He was comparing himself to the people who had ten million. There's always going to be somebody. I've even heard that elite group of people who have billions of dollars wait each year to see what Forbes says about who's on top.

The article suggests that it's not the people who are poor and hurting that have a hard time giving. It's the people who have begun to be successful, wealthy. It said statistics show that poor people give about 4% of their income to others, to good causes. The wealthy give about 1.5%. The article went so far as to say, "Being rich tends to corrode whatever heart you've got." It also goes on to say it doesn't take a lot to change that. You can recognize the need of others, but being wealthy tends to make one less generous, not more so.

One of the things that seems to be hard is that as people begin to get wealthier, they begin to have a different sense of who their peers are. It's easier to give to peers than it is to give to people who seem different. Oftentimes as we get more comfortable, we look as those who are less comfortable, the poor, and it seems that we have a gap between us. It's hard to know even what to do.

It's interesting that success may get in the way of our being willing to bless. I do think we are reminded of that as God calls us on this journey of life, just like he called Abraham to go on a journey. The journey was not offered so that Abraham could find a seaside resort. Abraham was called on the journey so that he might be a blessing, a

blessing to the nations. A new people that followed God, that recognized the guidance that God would give them.

It is that struggle between recognizing the journey God calls us to be on and the journey society tells us we're on—a success-driven journey that invites us to focus just on ourselves versus the journey that God invites us on where we're called to be a blessing.

It is as I begin to think about that that I recognize that too often I think about my blessings as the things I have rather than the ways I can care, give grace, show love. Part of the whole thing about forgiveness is that I can get stuck in self and in the ways of the world. Forgiveness, again, is the thing that calls me to accept God's blessing. It calls me to turn and recognize that God was willing to plant us near a stream of water. God is willing to be that stream if we open our hearts and allow the forgiveness to be real.

We were talking in Sunday School about how sometimes it feels like God gives us the gift of grace, of forgiveness, but what does that mean? One way I think about it is with this metaphor: God is putting a road sign in the middle of the road that says "Turn here if you don't want to go off the cliff." Because the gift is the sign. It's that thing that says you can be different. We can decide to keep going or we can turn, but it changes us. It changes our direction. It changes who we are. It leads us to a different place.

And it is a different place. The place is called righteousness—right relationship with God. Our scriptures tell us about the righteous being blessed. Then, we can look at how Jesus describes "blessed." "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the humble. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are you when you are persecuted and insulted for Jesus' sake."

When I'm thinking about my children, I often have a hard time with this because I want them to be successful. I want them to make money and have a nice life and enjoy themselves. I don't want them to be poor in spirit. Sometimes I don't want them to be humble. There is this tug and it's hard to recognize that when we humble ourselves, when we mourn, when we care about what's happening to ourselves and to the world, when we are called to be peacemakers, that leads us to a different kind of life.

Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you." Blessing is easy, right? What do we say? Can we say, "Yes, I hear you. I'll try."

God has blessed us. God has planted us in a place in faith where we can drink in the gift of the Spirit. We come to communion reminded that we are planted and given sustenance through the grace of God. We, too, are invited to be those who bless—to be merciful just as our father in heaven is merciful. Amen.