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 Texts: John 21: 15-19; I Corinthians 13  
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### An Instrument of Peace: To Bless and Not To Curse

A week ago I was sitting in a café in New Orleans visiting with a friend. It was a quiet night, and we were catching up on all that had happened during the course of the pandemic. People filed in and out, and the proprietor asked each person who entered to offer proof of vaccination before sitting down. As we talked, voices immediately behind us grew louder than normal, and suddenly a man was shouting at the proprietor, who raised her voice in return. It turns out he didn't have a vaccination card, nor did his girlfriend, and he took umbrage at having to show one. He was then asked to leave. In response, the man cursed the woman asking for the card, he cursed the café, he cursed all of us who were enjoying our evening there, and before storming out, he ripped down the sign stating that proof of vaccinations and an ID would be required upon entering. When that was over, his girlfriend returned and hollered vile things. After that, thankfully, they were gone.

It was an ugly moment. The woman tasked with enforcing those regulations was visibly shaken, and a kind of pall descended on the café. After hesitating for a moment, I approached the woman, thanked her, and told her how grateful we all were that she had stood firm against the curses. Her refusal to budge was what allowed the rest of us to enjoy an evening out, confident that those around us had taken appropriate precautions to protect not only themselves, but the people around them as well. It was my own feeble attempt to counter all those curses with a small blessing.

With that story in mind, I'll say that I wish to keep my message to you short and simple this week. There will be no theological gymnastics, and, I hope, little with which to disagree. I merely wish to remind you, as if a reminder was needed, that for one reason or another, we're living through a time in which curses abound. It's so easy to curse. But more than that, what I wish is to offer a reminder of how much better it is to bless. I wish to remind you of your own capacity to bless, to affirm, to upbuild and uphold. I wish to recall the remarkable power – a power available to each of us – to spread blessings, rather than curses.

Incidents like the one I witnessed in New Orleans seem common enough. No doubt some of you have witnessed that sort of behavior of late as well. But it happens in lots of other ways as well. Some pronounce curses upon the police. Others pronounce curses upon black and brown people. Some curse vaccine mandates. Others curse the unvaccinated. There are some who curse the Republican Party, and others who curse the "Dems" – as I've seen them referred to, in what itself seems like a minor form of cursing. There are those who curse the rich as greedy, and those who curse the poor as lazy or undeserving. There are some who curse immigrants, and there are others who curse those who don't conform to ordinary gender norms. There are some young people who curse jocks, or theater kids, or the bookish. There are those who curse people who prefer a plant-rich diet, and there are others still who curse those who enjoy chicken and steak. It's so easy to curse. It's so easy to maim and wound with our words, our speech, our derision, our barbs. Curses fall like hail all around us.

How are we to understand that propensity toward curses – especially now? It's a perennial feature of human life, found in biblical and classical literature alike, and throughout

modernity too. But we're living through an era of accentuated curses. Surely social media has something to do with it, as misinformation and reactionary clickbait stokes our aggrievement and outrage. Surely it has to do with the race to the gutter that characterizes much of American politics. Surely it also has to do with the very real economic losses and marginalization that many people are now feeling. Surely it has to do with the gap between extreme wealth and ordinary wages that seems to widen year by year. And surely it has to do with the ways we now cluster with members of our own tribe, so that we're not asked to negotiate differences often, if at all. Surely it has to do with all of those things.

But it most certainly has to do with something else too: the threshold we crossed two weeks ago, where we've now lost 700,000 people, many of them needlessly, to the virus, a number that stands at about 725,000 now. It's an unimaginable number, more than were killed during the entire Civil War. It has to do with the unmourned losses we've all experienced, and the restrictions that we've all lived through. It has to do with the nagging worry that this isn't ever going to recede, that we're going to be living with the virus for a long time to come. Where we once were able to encourage one another through the worst moments of the pandemic, now the strains and fissures are showing themselves – in jagged emotions, in depressed and anxious people, in angry outbursts and arguments, in poison penned notes, in an uptick of mental illness, and sometimes even in suicides. We're on edge.

It's my belief that what is required at this stage of the pandemic isn't another lesson about endurance, or persistence, or getting through to the other side. Instead what is appropriate to our situation these days is a word to help gentle those frayed emotions, to help smooth the rough edges, and to calmly hold firm to what we value, even when the arrows are flying. The gargantuan task for all of us, as people of faith together with people of no particular faith, is to care for one another, which is to say, to bless one another, and the world around us as well.

To help with that task, I've chosen two familiar Scripture passages that speak into this moment – Jesus's words to Peter after the upheaval of the crucifixion, and Paul's words to the Corinthians, written during a time of unrest within that community. I'll offer a word about each.

The scene between Jesus and Peter is one you likely know, but recall it briefly with me. They stand on a beach, and Jesus is trying to help Peter find his way through the pain he had recently undergone. Under enormous pressure and in a very public manner, Peter had forgotten who he was, along with who and what he most valued. He had fallen apart, and so had the band of friends he was a part of. Seeking to restore Peter's sagging spirit, Jesus asks three times: "Do you love me?" "You know I do," comes the reply. "Then feed my lambs," Jesus says. Then he repeats himself, with slight variations. "Tend my flock," he says, and then "Feed my sheep."

A curse had befallen that community of friends several days earlier, a curse that took the form of an arrest and a public execution by an occupying force. What transpires on the shore is a way of lifting the curse with the power of a blessing. Something awful had transpired, and there were more struggles still to come. And yet Jesus stands on the shore after all of it, countering all that literal and metaphorical death, all those curses, with the opposite of a curse, which is a blessing. The way it works, he tells Peter, is to care for and watch over those that he has loved. Gather them, help them, encourage them, lift them, love them, Jesus says. Remind them that there is a power in the world greater than death. Help them to see that there is a force in the world stronger than the things that tear you apart or drag you into the pit. Let them know that there is a resurrection life that is available to each of them, that they can draw upon whenever it is needed. Remind them again that there is a life force which sustains and upholds, which mends

and heals, which gentles and soothes troubled souls. It won't be easy, Jesus tells Peter, but in the aftermath of such an overwhelming event, take care of those around you. Feed my sheep.

Those are words meant for the likes of us. They are, in essence, our vocation right now. If people are on edge, it is a sign that they are in some kind of pain, and we can be the ones to help to soothe that pain. I'm not talking about anything heroic necessarily. I'm simply talking about responding calmly when the arrows are flying around us. We can be those who listen, who exhibit empathy, who seek connection with others, and who search for the best in those around us. Feed my sheep, Jesus says, which in this moment simply means going out of our way to gentle one another, and see each other through a tense moment. When we ourselves are feeling overwhelmed or prickly, jagged or beat up, we must recall that that healing, resurrection power is there for us, and that it can still our troubled souls. When the barbs or arrows are directed our way, we must once again draw on that power, to bless and not to curse, to remain calm and generous of spirit and heart, even if that courtesy is not returned. Pastoral literature calls it being a non-anxious presence in the world, and that is exactly what each of us must be: a non-anxious presence, reaching toward the power given us to bless, and not to curse. Feed my sheep Jesus says. You have the power to do that in every interaction you have. You have the capacity to feed someone's weary, aching, or troubled soul.

The second Scripture I have chosen for the morning is also familiar, probably overly so, from I Corinthians 13. They amount to the Apostle Paul's conferral of a blessing upon the Corinthian community as he tried to soothe and smooth the jagged edges that had been exposed in that place. The Corinthians found themselves under a kind of curse, and Paul's words were an attempt to lift it. But not only that: it strikes me that the book of I Corinthians in its entirety could profitably be read as a parable for any community – whether a local church community or a national community in upheaval – about how to find and bless one another again. The book builds from descriptions of the tensions and arguments gripping the Corinthians to a near ecstatic rhapsody about each person, each part, being a member of the other, and needing the other in order to function. And then it climaxes with those supreme words about love. It is patient. It is kind. It is not boastful. It does not envy. It's not arrogant. It's not rude. It can bear or withstand anything. It rejoices in the truth, and in truth telling. But it also understands that the truth of any given situation, including the truth about who we ourselves are, can be difficult to discern, for “we see through a glass darkly.” And isn't that our blessing and our curse alike? We see and discern but dimly, which has the paradoxical effect of freeing us from the need to be right. We see through a glass darkly, which bestows upon us the freedom to be generous toward those who see something different through that glass. We see through a glass dimly, which allows us to make room for the infinite variety among human creatures. It's not that anything goes. Basic facts do matter. But the ultimate questions - how should we organize our lives; to what and to whom do we owe our allegiance; what's worthy of our respect, and our time; what does it mean to love another; are we alone in the world, or is Someone watching over us – on the ultimate questions, we can give each other room, space, respect, generosity. When it comes to the basic questions of what it means to be human with one another, we can learn to bless, and not curse.

I'll end with a story, this one a more hopeful counterpoint to the one I offered at the beginning. This summer our family stopped at a motel in Kansas on our way out to Colorado. In the morning I woke up early to run, getting out just as the sun was coming up. It was a town called Quinter, with no more than a few hundred residents. I turned from the motel parking lot and headed away from the interstate highway behind me. Within half a mile the town ended, and

an unpaved road continued for as far as the eye could see – and farther. Something about that openness – of the land and of the sky - moved me tremendously. My heart felt light, and my feet moved quickly along the road. When it was time to turn around, I resisted the urge, and kept going – past a power transformer and then finally to a crossroads where I could see a farmhouse just ahead. Then I turned around. By the time I returned to the motel, I was fairly glowing, about the beauty, about the sky, about the land. Something about that place had conferred a kind of blessing upon me. And so once the car was packed up, I insisted that we all drive back out along that road, to see if any of that magic, any of that blessing, would somehow rub off on the rest of the family. We drove to the crossroads, and then we got out, and took a family picture, right in the middle of all that open land and sky.

Meanwhile, a farmer had spied us, and he pointed his tractor our way. I braced myself to be scolded – to be told that we couldn't or shouldn't stop or park where we had. I imagined the farmer telling us to get off his land. Instead, a man with gray hair, a mustache, and a face as open as the sky above simply asked, "You folks ok?" I reassured him that we were, and then told him how taken I was by the sheer beauty of the place, and how I wanted my family to take a moment to admire it as well. "We're from the East Coast," I told him, "and it's beautiful there too. But this is a different kind of beauty, and it's worth it to just pause in it." At that, the man just sort of opened up. "I'm so glad that you like it," he said. "Most people don't. They just hurry by on the highway. They can't get out of here fast enough," the man told us. "But those of us who live here love it." Then he pointed up the road. "That's my farm there," he said, pointing at the house I had spied at the end of my run. "If you go a little farther, there'll be a dip in the road, and there's a creek there. It's lovely, and you might like it." Then we parted. We went and saw the creek, and it was lovely. The kids got out of the van and they ran for a long stretch on that dirt road. After that, we headed for the highway. On our way out, we waved to the farmer, and he waved back. It was such a simple moment. But I, we, felt blessed by that man, and by the simple kindness that he showed us.

The story has an epilogue. A week or so later, I shared what had happened to a small group of old and new friends in Colorado. I spoke about that little town that I had never heard of, Quinter, a town that almost nobody could possibly have heard of. And I spoke about the encounter that had taken place with the farmer, and how we had felt a kind of magic there, a kind of blessing falling upon us. As I was talking, a woman across the table who I had just met was staring at me intently. "That's where I grew up," she said at last. I was raised in Quinter. When I told her about the power transformer, and going another mile past it up the road, she nodded knowingly. "I know exactly where you were," she said. "And I know who you were talking to. That was Mr. Oaks."

I don't know anything about Mr. Oaks, except that on a summer morning, he was the source of kindness, and of a small, momentary, but deeply meaningful connection. He was the source of what felt like a profound blessing. I don't know how he votes, and I don't know what planets square his moon. I don't know where he likes to vacation, or what news sources he consults. In truth, I don't really care about those things. What I do know is that on a summer morning, Mr. Oaks conferred a blessing, one that helped to remind me that there is a wellspring of understanding that can open between strangers from very different backgrounds, a source of understanding as wide as the Kansas sky, as endless as the Western prairie, and as deep as all of that farmland soil. It called to mind Jesus's words to Peter, about the power of resurrection life, and about caring for all of those in his orbit. And it called to mind the Apostle Paul's words

about the staggering, immense, incredible power of love, and its capacity to unite and hold us firm.

That capacity is available to you. That resurrection life is there for you, and for us all. In a world prone to curses, be a blessing.

I close with the words of St. Francis, the words found in our final hymn:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.  
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.  
Where there is discord, let me bring union.  
Where there is error, let me bring truth.  
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.  
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.  
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.  
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.