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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Genesis 49: 22-26; Luke 2: 25-35; Matthew 28: 20b
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Ancestral Blessings

To begin, I'd like to describe a scene that takes place late in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It's found midway through the *Paradiso*, the third and final portion of the poem, which depicts Dante's journey into heaven. In Canto 15, at the midway point of his tour of paradise, Dante has an intensely personal moment. After encountering saints, reformers, and some little known historical figures, Dante meets his great great grandfather, a man named Cacciaguida. He is a benevolent presence, someone who delights in meeting his great great grandson. "O bough of my tree, in whom I have rejoiced even in expectation, I was your root," Cacciaguida says. He then shares with Dante stories of his - Cacciaguida's - life, after which he narrates the lives of the generations that followed after him, leading up to Dante's own birth. The whole poem, the entire cycle, you'll remember, begins all the way back in the *Inferno* with the experience of being lost in a dark wood. But now, toward the poem's conclusion, the encounter with Cacciaguida depicts what it feels like to come home, to sit with one who knows you, and to be told exactly where you've come from. In a story that begins with the experience of losing one's self, of forgetting those things that one most believes and holds most dear, the encounter with Cacciaguida, this great great grandparent, provides an ending that is an experience of self retrieval.

But the encounter is more than that. It also serves as a preparation for an experience still to come, at least in the chronology of the story. Cacciaguida concludes the encounter by foretelling the exile and loss that Dante will be forced to live through. "You shall leave behind all you most dearly love," Cacciaguida tells Dante. "You shall learn how hard is the way of going up and down another man's stairs," he says, and then he describes other features of that exile - the false friends, the betrayals, the reliance upon strangers for basic necessities like food. Others in Paradise have known of Dante's future fate, but it is left to a great great grandfather, a figure of absolute trust, a figure of calming reassurance, to convey that truth. Cacciaguida uses it as an occasion to help his great great grandson to arm himself, psychologically and spiritually, for the trials to come, assuring Dante that he has what is needed to preserve his spirit, his soul, in the midst of that great downfall. Indeed, even as Dante is reflecting upon those events from hindsight, he suggests that it was the wisdom and goodness of Cacciaguida who, generations earlier, had created the conditions and demonstrated the pattern that Dante would later use to pick through the wreckage of his life. It was Cacciaguida, at least in part, whose shining example enabled Dante not to lose faith in the midst of the catastrophe that was his exile, but to persevere, to keep on living, and most of all, to keep on creating.

Have you had someone like that in your life? Is there someone - a parent or grandparent, an aunt or an uncle, a long departed friend - in whom you have sensed an absolute trust, a person who has calmed you, set you at ease, and helped you forward through life's most difficult moments? Perhaps that person is now gone - or perhaps, like Dante, you never actually met that person, but you know that had you done so, that person would have been your cheerleader, your guide, your strength. Have you ever spent time imagining what it would be like to encounter them again, or even for the first time, and what they might say to you? Have you ever spent time imagining how that special presence might encourage you, might love you, might accompany

you through the highs and lows of your life? Dante hints that those individuals are actually the means by which we progress toward God. They are the means through which we come to know what God is like.

I want to consider some dimensions of those real and imagined encounters with you this morning, because I think it's a nearly universal pattern that we can see all around us. And seeing it around us might help us to see how it's also happening to us and for us. You see, what Dante does in the *Paradiso* with Cacciaguida is as old as the Bible, but it's also as new as the *Barbie* movie that I saw a few weeks ago with Rachael and the kids - which I loved. There, as in Dante, on the way toward becoming human, Barbie encounters a wise ancestor, a creator, who shows her the way forward on her quest. To put it in an older idiom, a biblical idiom, Barbie is blessed by this figure, is affirmed in the very core of her being, and that blessing, that affirmation, frees her to shed her plastic, and tanned, and accessorized way of life for something far less shiny, but far more precious: becoming flesh, becoming blood, becoming real...becoming human.

In essence, that's what's happening in the Bible, whenever an elder confers a blessing. I've selected several ancestral blessings for our reflections this morning - one delivered by Jacob to his son Joseph, one delivered by Simeon to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and then a final one, delivered by Jesus to his disciples - and thus, to all of us. Together, they suggest a number of characteristics that we might look for as we discern this pattern of what we might call generational repair taking place in our own lives.

Here's the first characteristic of that kind of blessing: it's immensely generative. The encounter between the ancestor, or the benevolent elder, and the person receiving that blessing, whether it's real or imagined, is a little like the blast delivered in *Oppenheimer*, to cite yet another summer film. Only now, it works as the inverse of that fiery inferno. Instead of unleashing a thunderous concussion that lingers for generations, the ancestral blessing radiates a goodness that spreads and spreads. That's the gist of Jacob's blessing of Joseph, but it's also the gist of Isaac's blessing of Jacob, and Abraham's of Isaac, and God's of Abraham. And it's the gist of the blessing that Moses gives to the wandering Israelites at the end of his life. A powerful, radiating blast of affirmation is delivered, and it's enough to sustain that person or that community for a lifetime, and longer. Sometimes, for those of us who are older, it's tempting to think that the blessing is conferred by the gift of money, inheritance, or financial well being. That's not wrong, necessarily, but it's also not quite on the mark either. Instead, I think the blessing is more like the gift of being, the gift of our own personhood that we sometimes manage to convey to another. It's the feeling of being loved and valued, of being delighted in, that often attends our earliest memories. It may be that all those games you attend for your grandkids, all of those plays and musicals, may be conferring a greater blessing than any wealth that you leave behind. It may be that the soccer balls you've passed, the board games you've played, or the walks that you've taken with the young people in your life, will have a greater impact than any trust funds you set aside. From God to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph and beyond, that kind of love and investment in the well being of another can have a seismic force, spreading on and on across generations.

Second, often, the blessing somehow anticipates the difficulties, the pain, that arises in the course of a lifetime. It doesn't shrink from the hard stuff, but rather bundles it all together with the positive and uplifting things that come from a blessing. That's certainly true of the Cacciaguida episode in Dante, but it's also true in the Gospels. When Joseph and Mary take the infant Jesus to be dedicated in the Temple, Simeon, a man filled with the Spirit, gathers the child into his arms and he prays over him. But it's not quite a blessing. That's reserved for the

parents, and especially for Mary. The text tells us that Simeon blessed them, while foreseeing the agony that would arrive for Mary: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Surely this is the grief of a mother who would witness her son’s death. But surely it’s other forms of grief too - the sword of separation, as Jesus became a public figure, belonging to others more than to her, or the grief of having to bear the weight of a revelation that no one else could possibly understand. However blessed, Mary was alone, and destined to confront agonizing pain.

I like to believe that somehow, Simeon’s blessing mattered during those agonizing moments. I like to believe that somehow, the wider, but still inscrutable project of goodness that he trusted came to fill Mary with a strange and reassuring comfort when she needed it. I like to believe that somehow, the pervasiveness of Simeon’s blessing was such that even in the bleakest hour, she wasn’t removed from the catastrophe, but was enabled to endure it, trusting that some greater force was at work. Perhaps that’s how it is for all of us. The Cacciaguidas, the Simeons of our lives, they leave an imprint that proves strong enough to sustain us. We could say that it’s like a soldier gazing at a picture of his mother, or his beloved, in a war zone. It’s an image of goodness, of love, that reaches across time and space to provide the courage to keep moving, to keep doing what must, for the moment, be done. That too is a part of the blessing.

The third example that I’ve chosen is brief, but no less powerful for that. These are the final words of the Gospel of Matthew, as well as the final words spoken by Jesus. They’re offered to his disciples as he ascends toward God, but they’re meant for readers too, who, after all, never had the benefit of direct bodily contact with Jesus. “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age,” Jesus says, which is meant as a kind of universal affirmation of each and every person who hears or reads those words. This time, it’s not a blessing merely for Joseph and his progeny. It’s not meant for Mary alone. It’s meant for you. There is a Something...let us say it better, there is a Someone...no, let us say it still better, there is a Loving Presence...no, let us say it with as much boldness as we can, there is a living and a loving God in this world who loves you, who seeks the very best for you, who wishes for your flourishing. And this God, shown to us in Jesus, has promised to be with you always, even unto the end of the age.

I believe that to be true. Even so, I also believe that, as with Dante and his great great grandfather, it’s those close to us who often convey that blessing, helping us to see and feel that Divine truth promised by Jesus at the end of Matthew. I’d like to conclude, then, by sharing a personal story of my own Cacciaguida, or in my case, Cacciaguidas. I do so in hopes that you’ll spend time considering who those figures might be in your life. But here are mine.

This summer, when we were in California, our family paid a visit to my Uncle Curtis, who is actually my great uncle. Curtis is in his 90’s now, and he was married to my grandmother’s sister, my Aunt Jeanie, who died this past winter. Curtis is a person of great integrity and of deep faith, a person I admire profoundly. He’s a keeper of our family’s stories, and I wanted my kids to be able to visit with him. And so on our last day in California, we sat with him at his kitchen table for nearly two hours. We talked about many things, but the conversation centered around my Great Grandparents, Raymond and Sarah Miller. They are my Cacciaguidas. They lived long lives, and I got to know them both. They lived on a farm in Central Pennsylvania. They had little formal education. They died in more or less the same neighborhood in which they were born. They didn’t write anything. They didn’t invent anything. They didn’t make lots of money. There is no evidence of their ever having lived, at least as reflected in a simple Google search. But they loved well, and they had a genius for living. They worked hard, but when people would stop by, they would sit and visit. They taught their family how to sing with one another. They enjoyed food, especially sweets, and they were

devoted to the people around them. They knew diplomacy, how to be in right relation, and they knew how to forgive. They were deeply pious, certain of the presence of Jesus in their lives, and certain of God's benevolent care.

Once, when I was in college, I wandered into the college bookstore on Valentine's Day. And there on the front page of the Harrisburg newspaper was a huge picture of my Great Grandparents, both of them well into their 90's. Grandma Miller stared straight into the camera, while Grandpa leaned over toward her with puckered lips, as if to kiss her cheek. They looked as though they had arrived on that front page straight from the 19th century, which, in a way, they had - they were born in 1898. I don't know how, exactly, but they had been nominated by readers in the area as those who best exemplified the characteristics of lasting love. It was true. They did it for themselves - they loved each other extraordinarily well. But they did it for everyone around them too. They wrote no books. They founded no companies. But they were poets of existence.

Sitting at Uncle Curtis's table, we passed around a picture of them, and we all shared the things that we remembered about them. And then I tried to tell my kids about how what Raymond and Sarah Miller created in their lives was still flowing through the generations all these years later, right on down to them. It flowed through my grandparents, and then into my parents, and then into me and Rachael, and then into them. Their blessing was immensely generative. It has seen many members of our family through some powerfully sad times, when a sword has pierced the soul. And it has helped many of us to sense the abiding presence of God in our lives, a presence that will not let us go. They are my Cacciaguidas.

Sometimes, when I feel low, or when I feel lost, I try to imagine what it would be like to sit once again with my Great Grandparents. I try to imagine their encouragement, their affirmation, their delight - in me. And I feel known. And I feel loved. And I feel strengthened. You could say that it's all in my imagination, and you would be right, in just the way that Cacciaguida was the product of Dante's imagination, and Jesus was the product of the imagination of whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew. It's an imaginative recreation of a truth that transcends the particulars of the vision itself. But the vision helps us to sense that deeper truth, which is that we are loved.

There is much in the world that feels catastrophically wrong right now. There is much about which we are rightly worried, about which we have little control. Perhaps it will work to try Dante's exercise for yourself. Imagine a scene in which you encounter your Cacciaguida, whoever that might be for you. Recall how that person filled you with love, with a sense of well being. Recall what it was like to sense that person's delight - in you. Recall what it might be like to be understood, in the fullness of your being. Imagine what it would be like to be known on that level, and to be accepted in all of your glorious complexity. Would you not be empowered to face whatever troubles came your way, our way, with courage? Would you not gain the confidence to face into the troubles of the world with grace, with calm, and with a profound assurance of hope?

Now hold that thought for as long as you can. And then think: this must be what the love of God is like. And then think: the next task is not only to feel the force of that vision, but to become it. And then realize: we must become Cacciaguidas, as best we can, for the sake of those we love, but more importantly, for the sake of the entire human family. Hold that thought for as long as you can.