

Sermon

How Firm a Foundation #2: The Art of the Blessing

Isaiah 30: 21 and Matthew 5:1-12

This day already feels quite full and it's only just after 11:00! Maybe you can still hear the echoes of dogs barking and the kids cheering from our back parking lot? We held our Blessing of the Animals service this morning during Sunday School. There may still be some treasures left on the blacktop ...You never know what will happen -or what will remain when furry friends are invited to the blessing party.

As you may know, on October 4th, much of the world honors the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, that 12th century mystic who sought peace and found God in creatures large and small. We found this year perhaps was the right time to acknowledge/honor the joy we feel at taking care of animals even as we try to take care of each other.

Whether a quiet ritual for a few or a communal one, part of the power of a blessing is the way ordinary life is lifted up onto sacred ground. Even if just for a quick moment, we touch eternity and are somehow changed.

Blessings given and received are an integral part of our faith tradition -- and all the world's religions. They are both ancient and new, invoking divine presence, and inspiring us to claim something more.

In most cultures, blessing is not separated from daily life but an integral part of it ... I remember standing in the clearing for a garden in Green Grass, South Dakota. I was with some of you on our church's annual trip out the Cheyenne River Reservation. On this early evening as the sky turned a dusky pink, one of our Lakota elders, lit sage and began the blessing ceremony. We chanted a breathtaking prayer to Creator Spirit as we turned in unison to the 4 directions of the earth, calling forth the fertile possibilities of this dry ground. May these seeds grow we prayed ...

Similarly, I remember another blessing circle on another partnership journey -- this time with the Tree of Life. As I recall, a group of us travelling together -- folks from our church and also friends from the Berlin Mosque gathered under leafy trees overlooking the Sea of Galilee. At this place, on a sunny hillside where Jesus may have taught the Beatitudes, we blessed one another with poems and interfaith prayers, we anointed our friendship and the steps we'd taken earlier that day as witnesses to those living under Occupation. What we'd seen and heard

mingled together in the air along with the voices of the world's languages swirling around us. It was a moment of peace in the chaos.

“Blessed are you who are the poor in spirit” ...

I was reminded of these experiences of blessing as I read the memoir, *Learning to Fall. It's* by the teacher and writer, Philip Simmons. (No relation to the Simmons family in our church community)

In it, Simmons, in his early 40s at the time, chronicles his journey with a neurological condition that would eventually claim not only his muscle movements, but his ability to walk and feed himself.

Really though, the book isn't about his degenerative illness at all but rather, the larger mystery of living life to the full even as you're losing it. He captures in words his growing vulnerability and what he calls “the blessings of my imperfect life.”

Like anyone who has faced the impossible, Simmons has to give up a lot. His teaching career, his love of climbing, his ability to walk among many other losses and ultimately, his life

A lover of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, Simmons describes the joy of reaching the summit of Mt. Chocorua one day with many companions guiding him. Even though he falls most of the way up, he does make it ... bloodied and buoyant to the top. However, he sheepishly acknowledged the need for a rescue crew to make it down again in one piece.

There's much falling in this book, literally and figuratively into the blessings of life. His falling in love, falling from ambition and ego, the falling into mystery, into loving his life no matter the outcome, his falling into compassion, understanding the shared plight of others who like him now see the world from a wheelchair. (... And ultimately, into the blessings of this present moment.)

As he experiences his physical abilities diminishing, Simmons writes, “we all have within us this capacity for wonder and blessing, this ability to break the bonds of ordinary awareness and sense that though our lives are fleeting and transitory, we are part of something larger, eternal and unchanging.”¹

What the Celtic theologian John O'Donoghue would call “found blessings.”²

¹ Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. (2000). pg. 152.

² John O'Donoghue, *Bless the Spaces Between Us*. (2008).

Blessings are among those practices which call us to wholeness even as we may be falling or failing or feeling pretty broken by what is occurring in the world. I confess to being grateful for a sermon to work on this week as it kept me grounded in

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expounds upon the world of blessings central to our faith. Blessings are known as the “Beatitudes” in the scriptures and Jesus offers the crowd around him and his newly called followers, the essence of who they are and who they are called to be as people of blessing. Here and now. And looking forward into the future of hope. “*Blessed are you*” Jesus says over and over again to them...

Found in the early chapters of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ ministry has begun and he and his followers have already been meeting crowds of people and healing and feeding them (4:23-25).

Revisiting these nine beatitudes today can remind us of the blessings of a faith and our beloved church that calls us to enact a world of gentleness, compassion, justice and mercy as the rule of the day. The Greek word for "blessed" used here is “*ma-ka-rios*,” and its meaning is bigger, more nuanced than wishing someone well or happiness. It's akin to wishing them a wholeness, a joy that is as wide as God’s mercy. God’s shalom.

The Sermon on the Mount is also the thematic text we’re using for our Sunday School program this year. And we’re taking a beatitude a month and how our lives can reflect them.

In Matthew’s text, Jesus reframes the Old Law, the Ten Commandments, given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Jesus 1st century listeners would know this liberation history by heart. And, now the path of their discipleship. Counter-cultural to their core, Jesus pronounces God’s blessings on those who expose our vulnerability, rather than the deserving and privileged of society. The beatitudes speak to those least likely to have the competitive edge. Those whose voices are not heard, those at the end of their rope, and mourning the world, those who stand up for others, risking their lives.

These are the blessed ones.

They shall be comforted and filled with mercy.

There is a challenge in living out the teachings of the Beatitudes. if we take them to heart. Especially now. The late theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that 'I am increasingly aware of how much we fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing ... To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer.'³

³ Henri JM Nowsen, *Life of the Beloved*. (1992).

This is a serious time to hold, receive and share the blessings and burdens of one another wherever the days ahead may take us. We have so much to navigate ahead of us for our families, our community and our nation as a whole as the pandemic continues to overshadow our lives and as the struggle for racial justice continues fiercely. Maybe it's time to retrieve the lost art of blessing in our daily lives.

The practice of blessing one another right where we are whether in a church parking lot, on someone's back porch, or front lawn. Whether we're sharing a family blessing over a meal marking an anniversary or heading off to school or work in the morning. Afterall, blessing is part of our ongoing inheritance, a firm foundation upon which we stand.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has said, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."

I'm going to invite you now to join me in saying the beatitudes one at a time together, as part of our benediction today.

As we go through these, maybe a name of someone you love may come to mind, or a neighbor, a group of people, or a country to hold it in your heart ... we'll pause after each one. If you wish, say after me,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit"

"Blessed are those who mourn"

"Blessed are the meek"

"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 those who are persecuted for justice sake."

"Rejoice and be glad, Blessed are each ONE OF YOU!"

Amen!