



SUNDAY SERMON

Being Blessed and Blessing Others

Here's a brief story from the blog of a friend of mine, Caitie. She was making her way through the busy Atlanta airport recently when she heard a voice, rising over the dull thrum of the hurrying crowds. "Hello, hello, welcome! The woman's voice was coming from a newsstand - that repository of stale candy, airplane reads and the latest dispiriting news. The woman continued, "Look at these smiling people going to great places!" My friend was startled at this cheery warmth - was this some kind of smarmy come-on? It seemed so weird in that mostly impersonal place full of passing strangers. But then my friend noticed that the woman was waving, seemingly directly at her - no, more than that - waving to everyone, and to my friend, her message suddenly rang clear and true - the message, to one and all, was I love you! Caitie's response to this in her blog is too good to paraphrase - she writes, "and sometimes the fog lifts and we see that the saints and the seers, the ones who answer the prayer we didn't know we were praying are here in the concourse among us."

The prayer we didn't know we were praying. I believe our readings answer that prayer as well - our secret, ongoing urgent prayer that we be loved, unconditionally, extravagantly and in spite of our various failings. We yearn to feel blessed, at least every once in awhile, at least enough to keep us from feeling simply helpless and hopeless in the face of the world's and our own troubles. We hear this blessing from the prophet Isaiah to his people in exile. He calls Israel his servant in whom he delights, one he upholds and will lead by the hand, a people whom God will work through to bring about justice. Here is unexpected blessing and love to a defeated, lonely displaced people, a message of "I love you" at a time when it was so needed.

And then we have the story of Jesus' baptism, pretty much the same story in all four gospels. A dove descends on Jesus at his baptism, and these words are heard "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Beloved, well pleased; this is a blessing if there ever was one, and it must have come to Jesus unexpectedly, at a time when he most needed it, the prayer he perhaps didn't even know he was praying. He'd been following John the Baptist, gradually feeling a sense of his own separate calling but probably wondering how it would take shape - and he would head to the wilderness to be tested. But at this baptism, our story says something extraordinary happened, that God made his presence known to Jesus, let him know he was beloved and blessed, whatever the future would hold.

continued

DATE

Epiphany I
Sunday, January 12, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

Ever since, we have offered this blessing at baptism to people of all ages, a symbolic action with water and oil to signify each person's innate worth and dignity, each person's status as beloved of God. And yet, it is so easy to lose sight of our blessedness, so easy to deny to others their blessedness as well, so rare to gratuitously express love to strangers, like that woman in the Atlanta airport.

Our need for blessing, for knowing we are loved is existential, part of our being, and yet we are sometimes blind to it - like a prayer we don't even know we are praying. I was counseling a woman some years ago and she told me of an incident with her therapist. He had asked her about her relationship with her mother. She recounted its difficulties, her mother's judgment, her seeming lack of affection or even approval for her daughter, the mother's fear of the daughter's sexuality. After listening for awhile, the therapist commented, "Your mother never blessed you." As those words washed over her, the woman began to sob, overcome with how true that felt and how much she longed for such a blessing. We all need this; we need to know we are beloved. Usually this comes from other people, our parents and family - grandparents can be great at this, our friends or special teachers or mentors.

It is largely through them that God's love finds us, although every once in awhile blessing comes in another perhaps more mystical way. I've always loved these lines from the third of T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets"

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, obedience, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is
Incarnation.

Blessings come to us - unexpectedly, we know not when or whence, but we need them, and, by grace, they do come.

Being blessed, knowing you are loved is important for our own well-being, but for more than that. Feeling blessed isn't just about feeling good about yourself; feeling blessed is part of what we need to be a blessing to others. God's first blessing of Abraham included these words, "I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing." Israel needed God's blessing to endure exile and emerge as a light to the nations. Jesus needed God's blessing to live out his ministry of healing and acceptance and forgiveness. With God's blessing, he and we have within us the capacity to embody God's love in the world, to live God's love as we say here at St. Columba's.

When I think about the connection between being blessed and being a blessing I remember the young loves of my life, times of falling in love and having that love returned. I would feel as if I loved not just the boyfriend, but everyone! I was bursting with love and delight - even for my

parents, even for my sister, even for strangers on the street. It was a luscious, exhilarating feeling, bringing out my best, most generous self. Now, as I watch young love from the sidelines or the movie theater, I look for more steady, less giddy connections between being blessed and being a blessing. But still they are there, inextricably connected, but needing our attention, our cultivation. How can we be more aware of being blessed and thus more generous in blessing others?

Prayer can play an important role. When we take time to reflect or meditate on each day's blessings, we often realize there have been more of them than there has been bad news or disappointment. Prayers of gratitude foster our awareness of blessings and perhaps help us to be more loving in response. Just being super attentive to others we meet, open to little ways they may show us how much they care or love us is a great antidote to our readiness to take offense, to react to negative behavior. And then, when we pick up on this, the way my friend picked up on the woman at the airport, give the love back - not just to the giver, but to someone else - spread blessings!

Let abundant love coming to us in whatever ways ignite our hearts to love back - joyfully. Bp. Jack Spong even encourages us to love wastefully! What a bold charge - we never want to waste anything, we want everything to count, right? But love, no. There can never be too much. Love can go unnoticed, unreceived, unappreciated, unrequited, but even so, it's never a waste. Maybe I have to take that back. I guess I'd say extravagant love is wasted if it only serves to enable destructive behavior or if it diminishes the dignity of the giver. Love may be lost on its object and never acknowledged, but that love is still worth expressing. When we are blessed, we are not only given what we all desperately need, but we are given what we need to be a blessing to others.

I have a footnote here. If you heard Ledlie's sermon last Sunday as I heard it, he was making the same connection between loving and being loved, blessing and being blessed. Only he was starting from the opposite end - loving leading to awareness of being loved, blessing leading to awareness of being blessed. I've been mostly working from being loved to loving, being blessed to blessing others.

I think the connection is true both ways, in either direction.

It's lovely to have one's theology mesh with and be enriched by a colleague's, and I thank Ledlie for that.

Living God's love is our mission as a church; living God's love is how each of us is meant to live. Blessings and loving, the giving and receiving of both are our highest callings. When we live into them, like Jesus, we are living as God's beloved children, in whom God is well pleased. Amen.