

The Blessing

This is my last sermon here at Bering, and I have really felt called to talk to you about a topic I have been intrigued by ever since I got to Bering – that of giving blessings and being blessed. My first attempt at blessing anything occurred when I was nine years old. We had moved to a small town in the Midwest, and my Chicago born mother let me come and go as I pleased, probably figuring that I couldn't possibly get into trouble in the middle of nowhere. She was wrong. I was all over that town. I rode my bike downtown to look at goldfish in the dime stores and I would sit at the counter in Woolworths and pay ten cents for a coke. And yeah, I know that sharing this dates me in ways that probably horrify my kids.

My dog Prince was my best friend and constant companion. I adored that dog. He would ride in the basket on the front of my bicycle and go everywhere with me. I had questions about heaven and dog souls that were never adequately answered by anyone, it seemed. It bothered me that Prince had never been baptized, so I decided that it was up to me to provide some sort of blessing for my beloved dog.

I grabbed a Tupperware container that I would normally use for gathering tadpoles and headed off to the Catholic Church for holy water. My Catholic friends had shown me the vessels that contained this precious fluid and how they would cross themselves with it. This stuff was bound to be more powerful than Lutheran water. My native denomination used water to baptize, but nobody ever called it holy. This was bound to be more powerful stuff.

So, yeah, I stole holy water when I was nine. And in the basement of our house, I conferred the best blessing that I could muster onto my beloved dog.

It took almost 40 years before I found myself blessing animals in an official capacity here at Bering. One of my first pastoral experiences here at Bering was getting to bless pets at our Blessing of the Animals Service. A couple of months later I blessed bunnies

out here in the Bering courtyard. Les Wood, one of our staff members here at Bering, heads an animal rescue society called Bunny Buddies, and he had asked me to do a bunny blessing. The turnout was amazing. The courtyard was covered with pet bunnies and adoptable bunnies and lots of bunny lovers, and I blessed bunnies for nearly an hour and a half. It was wonderful.

In both the blessing of the Animals and the blessing of the bunnies, I know that blessings seemed to flow in both directions. I was blessed by the furry softness, blessed by smiles, blessed by the way people loved and cared for their pets. I was blessed by the moments of connection; the communities that surrounded me.

Today's Hebrew scripture is a classic tale of blessing. The story of fraternal twins Jacob and Esau is a familiar tale for many of us. I've had twins on my mind a lot recently, as we have anxiously awaited the arrival of Rachel and Jennifer's twosome.

Isaac and Rebekah weren't getting any younger, and they really, really, wanted a baby. The bible says that Isaac prayed to God and Rebekah finally conceived. Rebekah was pregnant with twins. Apparently the boys growing within her were active little things, wrestling about a bit in the amniotic fluid, and Rebekah's enthusiasm for the pregnancy waned considerably. She may have been one of those moms-to-be with a bit of a flair for the dramatic, as she is quoted as saying "If it has to be this way, why do I live?" If carrying them was this bad, let's hope she had an epidural during delivery.

The boys arrive, and the sibling rivalry is off and running. This is a classic tale of family dysfunction, where Dad favors one son (Esau) and Mom favors the other son (Jacob). This is not a recipe for healthy family relationships. The boys themselves are radically different. Jacob stays near the house and kitchen and hangs out with his Mom. He is described as smooth skinned and a quiet man, not at all like his brother, Esau, who is an outdoorsy guy who hunts and does more macho stuff. Scripture tells us that Esau is also red haired and extremely hairy, and if you were part of an Israelite audience that

used to sit in a circle and listen to this story being told, this would be your cue to have a good laugh at Esau's need for a wax job.

As the story unfolds, however, we find that Esau has bigger problems. His father Issac is about to die, and it is his time for Isaac to bestow an official blessing on his older son. Thanks to a bit of scheming by Jacob and his Mom, Jacob sneaks in and steals the blessing given by his father that was intended for his brother, Esau.

For Esau, the words themselves had the power to confer God's blessing. To miss out on that blessing, to not hear those words, was devastating. When Esau yells "Bless me! Bless me also, my father!" our hearts go out to him. The agony behind those words is palpable. This man is desperate. Not having his father's blessing FEELS like his future has been taken away.

It's really amazing, this power that parents have to bless their child with words. Each of us has a need to hear those powerful words, those words that parents can speak. And when we don't hear them, it is devastating. Words like "I'm proud of you." "You are a wonderful son" "You are a great daughter" or "I love you, just the way you are" or "I wouldn't change anything about you." What power those words can have. And if we never hear them, if we never hear those words of complete love and acceptance, it is devastating. It FEELS like the future has been taken away.

Dear ones at Bering, today I want to point you in the direction of the One who is truly our source of blessing, the One who gives us hope and a future. We are blessed by Christ, the One who came and lived among us, the One who comes again and again to give us hope and a future. The fact is, love that is contingent and conditional does not come from God. When you are Baptized, it is a recognition of the hold that God already has on you. Public recognition that you are already blessed by God, already bound to the one who created you and loves you the most. It is an announcement that you are blessed as a child of God.

It is interesting to note that words have a sort of dichotomous power. One the one hand, not hearing words of affirmation, words that make you feel loved and accepted, is difficult. On the other hand, hearing words of rejection is just as painful. As many of you know, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church is going to be meeting in Fort Worth over the next couple of weeks. And, as many of you know, there are a number of proposed changes to the Methodist Book of Discipline. There is one line in that book that says, "Homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." For many of you here today that line might as well read, "You are incompatible with Christian teaching." They are cruel words, and I am ashamed that they are in the official book of our denomination. They have been created by people whose fear and need for comparison and control have left them convinced that they can place God in a very small box. They are blinded, a bit like Isaac, convinced that they can get between you and your blessing. But they are only words, words created by human beings who think that they can control God. That is simply absurd.

Now, I could take the typical scriptural references that are made on this issue and dissect them and create a really effective argument for why homosexuality is NOT incompatible with Christian teaching. But the fact is, those who place God in a very small box like to pick and choose their scripture and its interpretation. For a long time, Paul's statement that women need to be kept quiet in the church was used to keep women from teaching or preaching in the Methodist Church. Sometimes change takes an awfully long time. After a bitter struggle and tremendous personal sacrifice, two women were finally ordained fifty years ago this year – in 1958. One of them was the Rev. Grace Huck. Rev. Huck, who is now 89 years old, said that at one of her first churches a man pounded the pew and shouted, "There will be no skirts in this pulpit while I am alive!" Actually a no skirts policy would still work just fine for me. But it all sounds pretty weird now, doesn't it?

I suspect that someday (hopefully soon) the prohibition against gay and lesbian clergy will seem equally weird and archaic. God seems to call us without regard to gender or nationality or race or sexual orientation. The fact is, I have met talented and gifted

people both here at Bering and at Perkins who are prohibited from fulfilling their call in the United Methodist Church because they are gay or lesbian. We lose them to other churches and other denominations, and it is a horrible and heart wrenching loss. It is a travesty.

What I am here to tell you today is that, no matter what hurtful phrases the Book of Discipline contains, you are blessed by God, the One who created the world and its inhabitants in all of its magnificent diversity and declares it all good. And God called it good. The first blessing. The second blessing: you are blessed by the Christ who comes. As our scripture today in Ephesians says, you are blessed to be chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. You are holy. Blameless. You are blessed. And no one, not the IRD or the Confessing Movement or Judicial Councils or hurtful words in a book can take that blessing away.

In his book titled *The Wounded Healer*, Henry Nouwen says that Christian communities are healing communities not because wounds are always healed, but because wounds create new visions. Wounds move us somewhere. Wounds move us beyond complacency. Today I want to urge you to be moved beyond complacency. I want you to embrace your blessing – live it out by doing these three things. Number one: Picture a future. Number two: Put your blessing on display. Number three: Be a person who gives the blessing away.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” He managed to envision a future. He blessed people with his words because he saw a future, he saw hope, when hope might have seemed unreasonable. This sort of hope refuses to accept majority opinion. This sort of hope flies in the face of those claims we have been told are facts. This sort of hope is a threat to those who are in control. The Beatitudes do a great job of expressing that sort of hope. The blessing arrives where we least expect it, and the Beatitudes testify to a sort of inversion that negates social perception. Very early on Jesus is correctly perceived as a clear and present danger to the status quo because he pictured a new social order based on

compassion and love. That's it. That's what was so scary about Jesus. He defied the existing power-based ideology and replaced it with one of compassion and love. You are blessed to carry that new future with you.

Put your blessing on display. People outside the Christian Church will never be drawn to the Church until they are able to see how much we care for and care about each other. Bless me my father. Live your life by choice and not default. God has already given you a future. Carry that with you. Your faith should be systemic, the one thing that defines you the very most. In the coming weeks and months I want you to metabolize that faith. I want you to convert that faith into emotional energy. I want you to have the emotional vitality that enables you to resist despair. To embrace your blessing, to be amazed and grateful for the God who has changed your life, is to testify to a love that will baffle your enemies. This is subversive stuff, this loving your enemies. A church community that is rooted in this sort of energy and summoned by radical hopes will be both a curiosity and threat to some, but it will be an irresistible force of change for others. You will pull people in these doors who believe that God calls us to be a force for social justice. Embrace your blessing, display it, and know that no one can take it away.

Third, and most important, be someone who blesses others. Give someone the gift of listening. Look them in the eye when you are talking to them, not beyond them. You can bless someone else by engaging in holy listening and taking the time to be fully present. Tell someone that they have done a great job doing something, but if you really want to bless them, tell them why you like WHO THEY ARE. What is it about them that makes them special? Are they kind, compassionate, funny, insightful? You will never know the impact that your words of blessing can have until you use them. Don't let anybody escape from this place without a kind word, a hug, or a smile. Bless them with the light of Christ that shines in you. Bless others by fully embracing this church's call for social justice. Bering is beginning a broad-based social justice ministry group that will be meeting between first and second service. Don't let this opportunity slip away. Cry out against and act out against all power structures that dehumanize and marginalize people. That's what Jesus did. Go and do the same.

Finally, dear ones at Bering, I have been blessed by you. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this extraordinary place. This is the most amazing church that I have ever been a part of. I am blessed every week by this place, by Rob and the extraordinary choir and Bob's amazing talent on the organ. I have been blessed by a senior pastor who has mentored me and who (thank God) has a great sense of humor. I have been blessed by an associate pastor who is the best hugger I have ever met. I have been blessed by a Lay Teaching Committee whose guidance and words of encouragement have meant the world to me. I have been blessed by each of you - by your prayers, your stories, your smiles, and your hugs. Oh, I do like hugs. Thanks for sharing your lives with me. May God bless and keep you, always. A-men.