

Blessed  
Sermon Oct. 2, 2011  
Leah Fowler, First United Church  
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20  
Psalm 19

What does it mean to say we are blessed?

The dictionary tells us blessed can be “holy, sanctified, a sacrament.”

“Divinely or supremely favored; fortunate.”

“Blissfully happy or content.”

In the South where I grew up, people were sneaky sometimes with the way they used the verb bless. You could bless someone out, which involved screamin’ and hollerin’, usually with colorful language. And, you could sanctify any gossipy or petty comment if you followed it with “bless his heart”: “He’s not too bright, bless his heart.”

But I have come to take the language of blessing seriously. When I meet with baptizing families, I always teach them that they can bless their children at night: “I love you, I bless you, and I pray for God’s care over you.” When I was a teenager, I had dropped the “God” from “God bless you” when I heard sneezing. But when I was in seminary, on the first day of class with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, I sneezed one of my marathons of really loud sneezes. Tutu, who was attentive enough to learn his students’ names right off the bat, exclaimed, “God bless you, Leah.” The whole class swooned. And since then, I have realized that even though I am neither an archbishop nor a Nobel Peace Prize Winner, I too have the power to bless people in the name of God. So now, whether I notice sneezing in the subway or in the sanctuary, I do not hesitate to say, “God Bless You.”

The psalmist declares, “The ordinances of The Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”<sup>1</sup> The psalmist speaks of the covenant made between God and God’s people, a blessing that still marks us now.

The Ten Commandments are a significant part of that covenant. Each commandment merits a sermon in and of itself. But Jesus gave a good

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19:9a-10

summary of God's ordinances in Matthew, when he answered the question about the greatest commandment as follows: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ' This is the greatest and first commandment, and the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"<sup>2</sup>

The covenant is simple, really. Love God. Love neighbor. And your neighbors are not just the ones you see at your block party.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1646, describes covenant in two forms: Covenant of Works, and Covenant of Grace. <sup>3</sup>

We heard last week in the Deuteronomy scripture the dramatic "choose life!" speech. "I have set before you today life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Jesus, in following up his summary of the commandments, tells his listeners "Do this, and you will live."<sup>5</sup>

God gave us a covenant, a mutual agreement between God and humanity, of ways of being and doing that will lead us into the ways of life. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "This covenant, the Torah, "is not a practice of law to clobber people, not a censure to expel and scold people, not a picky legalism. It is rather a release from small moralisms to see things through the eyes of God's passion and anguish. The Torah is a reminder that God's will focuses on large human questions and that we also may focus on weighty matters of justice, mercy and righteousness."<sup>6</sup>

But our covenant with God is also characterized as grace. In human history with God, there have been countless failures in our relationship. We have worshipped other gods, whether it is the materialism of a golden

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:36-40

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 1646, section vii

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19b

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:28

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm" in *The Christian Century*, Nov. 12, 1980 p. 5 of the article

calf or the militarism that puts nation above God's call for peace. We have failed to treat neighbors near or far with the love to which Jesus calls us, whether it is exclusion of the Gentile, Jew, Greek or female or the fear of the immigrant today. We have neglected the poor and oppressed in biblical times and now. We have broken covenant, and we have broken God's heart. Time after time.

And though we often reap the consequences when we do not choose the ways of life God has set before us, God repeatedly intervenes in our lives with redemption. In biblical times God sent us prophets and priests, judges and kings to show us the way back into covenant with God. When we needed yet more guidance, God came to be with us in human form to show us the way. Though we are beyond biblical history, I believe God still sends prophets in our midst to show us the way.

I am currently reading Wendy Mogul's book *The Blessing of a B-*. She uses Jewish teachings to show how our imperfections, and particularly those of teens, can be used to build character and resilience. I know that when we say our Prayer of Confession each Sunday, we have an opportunity to turn our shortcomings into blessings as we receive the grace Jesus offers and seek reconciliation of our covenant with God and with neighbor.

Our covenant with God continues through the communion meal, a blessing we will receive today. Jesus told us in the words of institution, "This is the new covenant in my blood." When we take communion, we are fed and nourished by God's Holy Spirit. We are bound by bread in the body of Christ. We are nourished by ordinary elements and then called to extraordinary things. We are blessed.

And implicit in this bountiful and generous meal is the call to then turn and bless and feed the world.

Jesus said "If you love me, then feed my sheep." He did not say it once, but three times.<sup>7</sup> As this Sunday we begin our stewardship season, I invite you to consider ways you can respond to the Christian call to feed and to tend those in need. The stewardship money we raise will tend and feed souls, such as the 16 teenagers who spent Friday night at the church exploring matters of faith in the Quest confirmation lock-in. It will feed hungry minds and curious spirits we find in church school, young and old. It will keep this church building warm and lit and open to provide

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<sup>7</sup> John 21:15-17

hospitality to dozens of groups that gather to pray, study, worship, support, stay sober, make music, come out, celebrate, organize, confess and create.

Our stewardship dollars also literally feed the hungry in our backyard and in the world. \$5,000 goes to the Food Pantry; in addition to our funds, they need our prayers and advocacy as they are facing a major reduction in government funding.

Bread for the World, which addresses global hunger and poverty, receives \$10,000.

The Walk-In Ministry gets \$5,000. They served 360 people in August, which is more than double the numbers served that same month a year ago.

We support the PADS Shelter with \$5,000.

We feed people with the knowledge that leads to empowerment. The \$5000 we give to cluster tutoring helps educate 180 underserved kids in this building every Thursday night. Several of our church members are among those who teach and mentor them.

We move from charity to changing social structures, supporting PADS transitional housing with \$5,000 to help move people out of homelessness into economic self-sufficiency.

We also gave a \$2,000 micro-loan to a man named Eric Caine. Mr. Caine was wrongfully imprisoned for 25 years. He was exonerated recently, and is trying to rebuild his life in Oak Park.

We support the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia and our mission accompaniers Mamie Broadhurst and Richard Williams with \$20,000 as they minister to people who have been illegally and forcibly displaced from their land and their livelihood. Three delegations now from our church have been to Colombia to become advocates. For two years now we have sent church members to Washington, DC to advocate on matters relating to Colombia, immigration and women's rights. Last year we sent a delegation of 10 to DC, 6 of whom were 25 and younger.

The \$63,000 total we send to our two denominations, the UCC and the PC(USA), also supports global mission including disaster relief that is available the moment tragedy strikes—whether it is drought and wildfire in Texas, or tsunami in Japan. We are proud of our Presbyterian Church for opening the door finally to gay and lesbian members to serve in ministry.

I will join you over the next two weeks in considering my family budget with Chris. We will discuss what it means to be in covenant community with God and with this church. We will decide how we can financially

support the ministry of this congregation to feed people in the spiritual sense, and in the physical sense. We will make a pledge. I hope you will do the same in your household and will find it a blessing to covenant with us.

I want to close with a story. We have a church member who is highly educated and highly unemployed. It has been over a year since this member has been able to find full-time employment. This person has made looking for a job a full-time job, despite repeated disappointment. And this member has reached the end of the rope. Is beyond treading water. Last week, homelessness seemed inevitable. The options remaining for this person were living in a car, or signing up for PADS. Our church had given some assistance, but our pastoral services fund is now depleted and we could help no more. Still, Pastor Julie got on the phone to see what kind of resources could be found in a church like ours. We were all delighted when one member volunteered an unused property where this member could live for a couple of months. Neither the one offering housing nor the one seeking housing thought they knew the other... not until they finally met in person and realized they had stood side-by-side serving communion together at a worship service months before.

We move to this table to be blessed. We receive this blessing in a covenant community. We then turn, and consider how we might go out into the world as a blessing to someone else. Blessed to be a blessing. Amen.