



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Blessed to be a Blessing**

Numbers 6:24-27

John Edgerton

August 21, 2022

“May God bless you and keep you, may God’s face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, may God lift up the light of a loving countenance upon you and give you peace.” I can only offer vague guesses about how many times I have spoken these words. Many hundreds? Several thousand? I really don’t know. These words now roll off my tongue as a benediction at the end of a service, my fingers know the feeling of these words as they pour along with water over the brow of an infant at their baptism, my heart knows the weight and the lightness of these words spoken beside a hospital bed, a deathbed, over the clasped hands of a couple in their wedding ceremony. These are words I will remember for as long memory itself should hold for me.

And this, this passage from the Book of Numbers, this is where these words come from. They are words attributed directly to God. Just as Jesus taught his disciples how to pray the Lord’s Prayer, so too does God teach the people how to bless one another. Now it being attributed directly to God is a good enough reason to use these words, simply in obedience. But they are also gorgeous and wonderful.

It is gorgeous in its structure. It is a threefold blessing with three phrases, each one longer and more beautifully wrought than the last. It gives the feeling like the blessing is itself overflowing---act of water pouring.

And, and, there is the deeply human way that God is portrayed. God is not a human being, God is not like a human being. In some important ways a person is like God, but God is surpassingly, transcendentally more. In this blessing we are invited to imagine the very face of God. Shining on us with love the way a smiling parent can beam upon their child, that instantly identifiable look on a loving parent’s face when they see their child. It is gorgeous because we are given to see in our spirit God as we yearn for God to be.

What God tells us in this blessing is that by speaking this blessing, we are placing God’s name upon the one who is blessed. The end of the passage is: “thus shall they link my name to the people of Israel, or another translation, so they will put my name on the people, and I will bless them.” That’s what a blessing is. It is a link, a tie, a bind and connection. God’s name is put on the people the way a tire is put on a bicycle, the way a coat is put on against the winter’s cold, the way honor is put on the one who has done great things. A blessing creates a link between God and the one

who is blessed, and the one who speaks the blessing, too. The name and presence of God are lifted up and the presence of God is declared and recognized and revealed in.

And you, you as Christians, you as believers whose beliefs are as varied as your fingerprints, you as Christians are a blessing people. You ought to be blessing all manner of things. And in fact you do. If you are a regular worshiper here you will find yourself lifting up prayers of blessing every time we worship, sometimes several times a day. We bless the waters of baptism before they pour out, we bless the bread and cup of communion before we share it, we bless the offerings that become the ministries of this church, we bless the elders and deacons who serve on behalf of the church, we bless those being ordained as pastors, we bless backpacks, and the joining of new members to the church, we bless pets, we bless marriages, we bless the dying, we bless the grieving, we bless the saints. To be a Christian is to lift up prayers of blessing over and over and over, it is to call down the blessed name of God upon the world over and over and over, overflowing, beaming like a loving parent whose face shines upon the world.

It is a literal act that we do, lifting up our hands, speaking words aloud and speaking them in the quiet of our hearts. It is a literal thing we do when we bless others, bless the earth. A literal and visible act that points to a spiritual and invisible reality. We are all of us connected, linked, surrounded by the spirit of a loving God. As we lift up hands of blessing, we bring that truth to fruition in the world. We can bless the world, and in turn, be a blessing.

Thanks be to God.