

The Practice of Giving a Blessing

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

July 19th, 2020

Many years ago, I picked up one of my minister friends from Mississippi who came to visit me and enjoy life in the big city for a few days. We had just left Midway airport, and we were driving towards my home in the city, down I-55, when a guy behind me started to angrily honk his horn as he rode my bumper. He kept honking his horn and making gestures I will not describe. Rather than joining my anger at such unprovoked rage, my Mississippi friend broke out into uncontrollable laughter. I started to smile and said, "What? What is so funny?" "That guy behind you is cursing you when you are in the right lane and going over the speed limit, and he's not satisfied! Welcome to Chicago!"

People don't have as much trouble giving you a curse when you live in a big city. But not so in a small town like where my friend was from. No one wants to curse the car in front of you with loud honking only to discover it is someone you sit next to in church. The senior pastor I used to work with in Winnetka told me he was never more embarrassed than when he was in a hurry and honked his horn at the oversized Pontiac in front of him. When he passed her, they looked at each other, and he saw that it was the sweetest old lady from his church looking back at him sheepishly. And he was her pastor! That will teach you!

Now giving a blessing rather than a curse, we might find a bit easier to do. I remember one time many years ago when I was at the Piggly Wiggly grocery in my hometown and I unexpectedly sneezed loudly in the middle of one of the aisles. I quickly received a chorus of "bless you," not only from everyone in the aisle but also a belated one from one aisle over. I've never received so many blessings from people I did not know. Something tells me that if I sneezed now in a crowded grocery store, I might not be so blessed!

Today I want us to focus on the important faith practice of giving Blessings. I invite you for these few minutes to consider the transformative power of doing something very simple, and yet essential, and that is conferring blessings on the world around us.

I doubt many of us realize just how essential this practice of the faith is for the living of our faith. The idea of conferring blessings is one of the central themes of scripture.

- After each day of creation, God gives a blessing to everything created. And then God makes us in God's image so that we can continue to do what God has done, and that is to bless all the creation.
- When God tells Abraham that he will be the Father of a great nation, God adds that the nation will be a blessing to all the other nations. In other words, the special people are special not only because God has chosen them, but because their role in the world is to be a blessing.

- As a people grafted into the People of God's chosen, we, as Christians, are called to do the same and bless the rest of Creation. Each day of our lives is an opportunity to keep ourselves in a place of gratitude by saying to ourselves, and sometimes out loud, simple blessings of all that is around us.

I have been asked to give a lot of blessings in my life as a local church pastor. We assume that "giving the blessing" is in the job description of clergy. One of the joys of being a clergy person is that we are often given the honor of giving the blessing in all sorts of situations.

- In so many weddings, I have blessed a couple as they begin their new life together.
- In so many funerals, I have said the benediction on someone's life.
- Almost every month of my adult life, I have blessed the elements of holy communion
- I've blessed a fair variety of animals. Dogs and cats, of course, but also all sorts of rat-like creatures. The only snake that I "willingly" touched was at a pet blessing, and I made sure it was the tail, not the head, that I blessed.
- I have blessed many homes by going through the house, imagining the blessing each room will bring to a family's life, and saying a blessing. Admittedly the bathroom is always a bit awkward.

The Jewish writings called the Talmud say, "It is forbidden to taste of the world's pleasure without giving a blessing." One of my favorite writers and preachers, Fredrick Buechner, was invited to teach at Wheaton College for a year when the college library became the keeper of all his papers and original copies of his writings. As a New Englander and reserved Presbyterian, he found it awkward to see people in Wheaton unafraid to hold hands and bless their meal when at a restaurant. But he grew to appreciate that they were living their faith in a profound way that he had not been doing. He witnessed a people unafraid to give a blessing in public.

For me, simple blessing with the eyes open will suffice. I like to keep my eyes open and to take a piece of bread and say, "Bread in our hands, friends at our table, Christ in our hearts. Amen." I've also realized that I want my children to be comfortable giving a blessing. So we take turns at our table giving a blessing to our meal. It is an honor that no one should be denied, not even children anxious to eat, who just want to get it over with or take it lightly by using the Superman Blessing (ask me later if you want to know that one). Hey, no one said giving the blessing had to be too serious a thing.

But, hopefully, we do not stop our blessing with just the food that we eat. As important as it is to bless our food, there is much more in this life that we have to bless. In the Jewish faith, the faith of Jesus, there is a blessing for all sorts of things. Observant Jews are expected to say hundreds of blessings throughout their day. Wake up in the morning and there is a blessing. Start on a journey, there is a blessing. There are blessing prayers for pastries, fruits, vegetables, and wine. Most begin with "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth."

The Celtic Christians pick up this practice of giving blessings throughout the day and all the times of our lives. There is a blessing for kneading the dough for making bread; one for taking a shower; one for calming the spirit after a disagreement; one for seeing an accident; one for recognizing a sign that you are aging. There are blessings even for house cleaning and even for fingernail trimming.

But saying the blessing is not only for when life is good, it is something we do when life is not good as well.

Elie Wiesel says when he was in Auschwitz a child was hung on the gallows. Afterward, the rabbis put God on trial for allowing such atrocities and they found God guilty. But then they had their prayers and prayed to that same God the prayers of blessing they had always prayed. Why? It makes no logical sense. Curse the evil and the bad times and you bless the good and the good times. But this is not what God does. Jesus said, "God lets the good rain and sunshine to fall on the fields of both the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. The only logic is that all life comes from God, and for that reason alone we may call it blessed, leaving the rest to God."ⁱ

The familiar scripture we have read from is, in reality, all about the giving of a blessing. Jesus blesses the bread and the wine as any good Jew would have done, especially on that Passover. But He turned that blessing into something more. Not only was Jesus blessing the meal - He was extending a blessing to the disciples. "When He had blessed the bread, He gave it to his disciples, this is my Body broken for you." Jesus blessed and gave Himself to each of His disciples. He blessed those who would run away in fear; deny Him, and one who betrayed Him. Still, Jesus was giving the blessing. So it is in their difficult times that we may find it most important to learn to give our blessings to everything and every situation we find ourselves in.

Friends, we are living in a time when many of us might find our hearts heavy with the grief for so many things we once took for granted and now find ourselves doing without: our jobs, our steady incomes and stable investments, going to school, going out to dinner, inviting people into our homes, the celebration of holidays with those we love, and even hugs and connections with grandchildren, being with a loved one in their final days, the celebration of weddings, funerals, or gathering together in church and singing the songs of God. The people Israel in captivity in Babylon once sang a song of lament: "By the water of Babylon, we lay down and wept for thee Zion." It was in the remembering of what was so blessed in their lives that they felt sadness, but also hope.

Now is a time, maybe more than most anytime in our lives, when we need to remember and give thanks for what our blessings have been. In remembering, we too will feel sad, but we will also find hope. Now is a time when the most important practice of our faith may be the practice of giving a blessing to everything we have in our lives. Let us bless our lives - without regard for how hard or painful it has become. Let us each day look around and bless all that we see. "Blessed are You, Lord God, King of the Universe, for..." You get to complete the prayer throughout your day. You have the authority; you have the power to bless and to be a blessing. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings," p. 204.