

Bless You

Luke 24:44-53

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I am always amazed at the universality of the phrase, “Bless you.” Wherever you are, when someone sneezes, you hear it. Sometimes it’s even like a race to see who can offer the blessing first as several people jump at the chance. There’s the more pious version, “God bless you;” and the more cultured version, “gesundheit,” which is technically translated “health” but is used in the same way. The phrase has become habitual in our culture, where people who in other situations would *never speak* to each other are offering one another blessings.

Of course, some of those folks are not religious. And they would contend that they are *not* offering a blessing: instead they are just being polite. But why use the phrase, “bless you”? if just being polite? Why not just say, “I wish you well.” Or ask, “Do you need a tissue?” What does it mean that we all go around blessing one another, whether or not we know what we’re doing?

I am so intrigued by this passage from Luke’s gospel, the very last time that Jesus is with the disciples in person. He first opens their minds to understand the scriptures- that God has been the same God from the beginning of the world until now, and God has always had a plan to save us. Then he commissions them: to proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected to all the people of the world. And he leads them out to Bethany, out from the Mount of Olives, and he raises his hands and **blesses** them before he’s carried up into heaven. And what’s more, but the disciples go back into the temple and Luke says they are continually **blessing** God.

Now I used to think that only God could bless – that people could ask God to bless but could not offer blessings themselves. When I was a pastoral intern in a large church in San Antonio, my senior pastor would gather all the pastoral staff very early on Sunday mornings for prayer. And he *always* ended his prayer something like this, “We praise you, God, we bless you, and we love you. In Jesus name, Amen.” And I *always* thought, “Really? How do we bless God?”

Then I got to be a professional bless-er. I mean, blessing is basically my job. I bless babies and folks who are dying, people who are coming into the church and those who are leaving. I bless folks in marriage and in death. And every week, at the end of worship, I raise my hands like Jesus did and offer a blessing to all of you. So maybe that’s why I’m so intrigued with this. What is a blessing? Who can do it? And why does Jesus choose his very last action with the disciples to be a blessing?

One Biblical scholar has said about this passage, “Blessing is a priestly act in which Jesus places his disciples in the care and favor of God.”¹ It is a way of entrusting them to God’s care, and assuring them of God’s kind attention. This makes sense, since Jesus won’t be with them in person anymore; and I love the imagery of placing someone in the care and favor of God. A professor told me once that the best way to pray for someone when you aren’t sure of the right words is simply to hold them up to God: to imagine them as held up gently into God’s gaze so

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 291.

that God might notice and care for them. This is a beautiful image of one meaning of blessing: entrusting to God's care.

But we can't overlook the fact that in this passage in Luke's gospel, the blessing is also part of a commissioning: Jesus "blesses the disciples with the fullness of God's mercy, [which is] the mercy they are being commissioned to proclaim."² He explains the Scriptures to them so that they understand what God has been doing in the world and in them – because they are supposed to be a part of that work. It's their work now, too. They have the toughest assignment you can imagine – the same assignment we have: to spread the word that the God of the universe is one crucified and resurrected, and that his mercy and love are available to ALL PEOPLE. All nations, yes, but also all races and all demographic groups and all orientations and all ages and all income levels. This is something the church still struggles with – and yet it's the message with which Jesus has *blessed* the disciples.

And so some would say that the church actually begins not at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples like fire – what we'll celebrate next week – but with this commissioning before the ascension. The life and work of the church begins with the blessing. And our continually blessing God is a sign of that life and that work, because we are carrying out the work that Christ calls us to do in spreading the gospel to all kinds of people. This is so beautiful to me: as we strive to look outside ourselves for our focus, our mission, as we look to make our life less about what happens in here and at least as much about what happens out there, the life of *our* church also begins with the blessing. We come together on Sunday mornings to learn, to be inspired, to be challenged, to be encouraged, to be reminded that we are not in this alone, but our actual work, our life together, begins when we walk out the doors.

A church I visited recently in Denver has a huge formal sanctuary with beautiful stained glass and dozens and dozens of beautifully crafted wood pews. I went in the sanctuary when it was empty on a weekday, and I was in awe at its vastness and beauty. But I was most moved as I was leaving and I saw a banner on the back wall over the doors that said, "And now the service begins." I thought that was so beautiful: and *now* the service begins. What's important is what happens because of the blessing, the work we take up because we have been blessed.

And so we return to the question I had each week in San Antonio: who can bless? Only God? Or those appointed and paid to do the blessing? The answer depends on what you think happens during a blessing: is holiness conferred or just recognized? My favorite author and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes beautifully about this topic, reminding us that we never need to confer holiness on another person or thing because it is already holy simply because God made it. You are holy. I am holy. This place is holy. The trees outside are holy. We need not designate them as such or say a special litany to make them so.

Taylor says that the act of blessing is simply seeing: it's recognizing the holiness that is already there, paying attention to a person or an object so that we see it as it is and pronounce it good. Taylor tells a story about teaching a bunch of graduate students with the poetry of Wendell Berry. He writes a whole series of poems about trees, and these very serious students are skeptical about how this poetry is important in their lives. They've paid good tuition for this class, after all, and they would like to learn something on which they can be tested. So Taylor

² Linda Lee Clader, "Luke 24:44-53, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 517.

gives up on the tree poetry earlier than she had planned, but before doing so, she asks the students to go outside and read one of the poems *to a tree*. They look at her like she's crazy, of course, but they do it. And she's amazed at their demeanors when they return: they have seen the trees' holiness. They had missed it before because they were not paying attention; but when they stopped with these beautiful words, they saw from the divine perspective. They participated in God's work. They shared God's power. They offered a blessing; and in doing so, they received one.³

Blessing is not just something that Jesus did, or something that pastors do. It's the work that all of us have been given as we participate in God's ministry in the world. When Christ left the disciples' physical presence for the final time, he raised his hands to offer them into God's care, to see them as they are seen by God, and to incorporate them into the work that God was already doing in their midst. And God continues to bless each of us in the same way: seeing us as holy; caring for us tenderly; and asking us to participate in God's good work in the world. But not only God can bless: anyone can bless. Anyone can see if they pay attention. Anyone can participate in God's good work. Anyone can offer such a gift to another; and all of us are called to bless and to be blessed.

So next time someone sneezes, don't just say "bless you." Offer a blessing. And receive one in return.

Amen.

³ Much of this section is inspired by chapter 12, "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings," in Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).