

Bless Your Heart  
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Date: September 16, 2012

12:09

If you haven't figured it out by now, this service is all about blessings. I wracked my brain this week to think about some of the uses of "blessings" I've encountered. Maybe some of them will sound familiar to you too.

The first is that if I ever got sick, hurt myself, or faced some adversity in my young life, I would often hear the phrase, "Bless your heart" from family members. It went something like this, "Grandma, I failed my math test." "Oh, bless your heart!" Or "Mom, I think I have a fever!" Once the fever was confirmed, "Bless your little heart." I assumed this phrase was always meant positively, as in, "Oh, you poor thing!" because that's how my family members, teachers, and older family friends would always use it growing up.

But then I went to college in the South and was told by a good friend from North Carolina that women often say, "Bless your little heart" in the South when they see a baby they don't think is very cute or basically when they think you're being an idiot but they're too polite to flat out say so. It would go like this in conversation, "Did you hear that Jim's wife left him?" "Well I hear he wasn't very nice to her, but bless his heart." Or, "Isn't this baby adorable?" Instead of saying yes, the person would coo at the baby, "Well bless his little heart!" This is a much more troublesome use of the phrase, meant with some underhanded sarcasm and judgment.

I also remember the phrase; "Count your blessings!" used often when I was little. This was used when you were complaining a lot. It's like the classic song written by Irving Berlin in White Christmas, "When I'm worried and I can't sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep. And I fall asleep, counting my blessings." [1] Sorry if that song is in your head now, but if you suffer from insomnia, just lie in bed and count your blessings and you'll apparently drift right off to sleep. Who needs Ambien when you can count your blessings at night?

Or think of your typical country song—my dog died, my car broke down, my girlfriend left me, I lost my job, my life is falling apart. And your unsympathetic friend would tell you, "Hey, man, count your blessings!" Basically, stop moping, and get a grip on yourself.

Blessings and the way we speak about them is apparently complicated. Today we have Christian preachers, Joel Osteen is the most famous, who speak about the Prosperity Gospel and God showering down blessings upon God's faithful. Theologian Scot McKnight has a wonderful way of understanding the dangers of the Prosperity Gospel and their materialistic views of blessings. McKnight says, "For the prosperity gospel, God could be seen as The Vending Machine God: put in faith and out pops blessings – money, homes, cars, beautiful spouses, clever kids, good neighbors, big churches, and plush vacations. For the prosperity gospel, humans are The Happiness Machine: receive the blessings, rely on the promises, act on the commandments and you can put on a happy face – a big one." [2]

This belief system within Christianity is flawed for many reasons. I think we all know that God is not really a Vending Machine God. You can't expect that out of your faith in God or your fervent prayers, you'll automatically get the "blessing" of a new home, a Stepford Wife, and that your kids will become the greatest child prodigy the world has ever seen overnight.

For the Prosperity Gospel, God's blessings are usually always material items. Now having a job, a home, being able to provide for your family, these are blessings. But the implications of the Prosperity Gospel are pretty stark. If you think that rich and successful people are blessed

by God and poor and struggling people are not, this creates a divide between those whom God chooses to bless, those worthy of being blessed, and those not worthy. We should know that God shows no partiality, this is all over the pages of the Gospels and the Book of Acts, but this belief system within our faith throws these teachings of Christ out the window.

I bring up the Prosperity Gospel because the view of blessings in our world today has become complicated and dare I say, a bit warped. To bless has many meanings, it can mean to make or pronounce something holy, or to request that God bestows God's favor, or to glorify, or to just protect or guard from adversity.[3] But it seems misguided to think that God blesses only those whom God somehow favors and does so with fancy stuff and leaves the rest of us out in the cold.

In today's Gospel story from Mark, Jesus blesses little children. The disciples try to stop this act of blessing from the beginning, they try to get the crowds to give Jesus some space and we're told they "spoke sternly to them." [4] Jesus intervenes, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." [5] When Jesus blesses these children, I don't think he promised them a new Mercedes or to have a mansion in the suburbs one day. This act of blessing shows that Jesus believes children are holy, that he wants to protect them from the adversity they would face in life. And Jesus blesses all of them, not just the cutest or the smartest or the most worthy.

Jesus knows and wants to lift up the reality that children see the world with that child-like wonder that we need to remember in our often jaded adult world. This is why he says to the disciples, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." [6] The implication is that we shouldn't be concerned with our position or our status or our stuff so much, that heaven isn't earned solely by our merit or our worth, that the kingdom of God is a gift. [7] Children get this. Why is it so hard for us adults to remember and believe that God doesn't love us because of who we are and God doesn't just bless those God loves the most? No, God loves us all because of who God is.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about how children view the world. His story can remind us why Jesus implored his disciples to not forget about those kids, about why it was important to bless them. They are a blessing simply because of who they are, but the way they see the world is a blessing for all of us too.

Rabbi Kushner says: "I was sitting on a beach one summer day watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle by the waters edge, with gates and towers and moat and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.

I realize that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who had somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh." [8]

Watching those children play in the sand with delight and face adversity laughing because they had each other was a great wake-up call for Rabbi Kushner on the beach that day. And this is why Jesus blesses those children. It shows us that the way children see the world and sometimes react to the waves that knock down what they've built up is a blessing. Because that sand castle is temporal, it won't be there when the tide comes in, it was the time spent building it together that was holy.

Today really is a day of blessings. Whether it's water, backpacks, or bicycles that are blessed, today is a day that we at Pilgrim Church get to shower God's blessings on one another. These blessings don't come because we've punched in our selection on the Divine Vending Machine and we've been given exactly what we deserve. In that case, I would definitely be getting a brand new BMW, I don't know about you. No, these blessings come from being in community, from seeing the holy in our everyday existence, from valuing relationships and experiences over the stuff we gather in this life, from holding onto the conviction that God loves us not for who we are but because of who God is. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Irving Berlin, "Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep," from *White Christmas*, 1954

[2] Scot McKnight, "The Problem for the Prosperity Gospel," <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2009/03/The-Problem-for-the-Prosperity-Gospel.aspx>

[3] <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/blessing>

[4] Mark 10:13.

[5] Mark 10:14.

[6] Mark 10:16.

[7] Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 81.

[8] Rabbi Harold Kushner, as quoted by Terry Hershey in *Sacred Necessities: Gifts for Living with Passion, Purpose, and Grace* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2005), 170-171.