

Blessing - Humility - Compassion
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“Blessing—Humility—Compassion” Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC

September 14, 2014 (Psalm 103:1-13)

As today is our Service of Blessing, the best place to start is to figure out what in the world blessings are in the first place! Blessed, blessing, or to bless is not the easiest biblical metaphor to grasp. This idea in Hebrew and in Greek can be attached to people, to things, and even to God.[1]

There are three words for blessing that we can explore to get a better handle on what we’re up to today. The Hebrew word is barak developed from a word that meant to bend your knee—a posture of humility. Yes, this is where President Barack Obama’s name comes from, in African languages Barack means blessed. So in the Bible we hear “God blessed Noah and his sons” and “The Lord blessed the later days of Job.”[2] This is about God being kind or forgiving or delivering people from their enemies. So naturally we people will be submissive toward God (on bended knee) and thank God for such blessings.

Additionally, folks used barak to talk to or about God. Like in Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget his benefits.”[3] This is a love song—God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies, works for justice, makes God’s ways known, acts, removes our transgressions, and has compassion for us. “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”[4] We’re talking about thanks and praise to God for all the ways God loves us into wholeness—bless the Lord, says the Psalmist.

Another way barak is used is for any ritual act of setting apart food in worship—people bless their food. The time honored tradition of praying before a meal goes back a long ways. Think of childhood prayers: “God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food.” Or my favorite prayer that we sang in youth group before meals—the Johnny Appleseed prayer, who was supposedly born in Leominster after all! (Solos scare me, so I’m just going to say it)—“O, the Lord’s been good to me, and so I thank the Lord. For giving me the things I need: the sun, and the rain, and the apple seed. The Lord’s been good to me.” We bless God and ask for God’s blessing on our food.

The second word for blessing is a Greek word in the New Testament (makarios.) And while it has nothing to do with bending your knee, it’s used in a similar way as barak. Christians had in mind good fortune or happiness. Think about the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”[5] Sometimes people translated the Beatitudes as happy—happy are the pure in heart, happy are the peacemakers. Happiness has the same root as happen and perhaps, so there’s a little bit of luck thrown in here with blessed are you.

Finally, there’s the Greek word eulogeo that is once again about setting aside food to be blessed when it’s used in some sort of ritual act. Basically the things that are blessed in the Bible are usually about meals. It makes sense that on the day we bless our water, backpacks, and bikes—we also have the church BBQ because what’s a Service of Blessing without some food? And Eulogeo is even used to describe people blessing other people—best example is

Jesus blessing the little children. “And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”[6]

Alright, this is too much. There’s three different words used in the Bible for blessing. People can be blessed, food can be blessed, and God can be blessed. We can bless God and God can bless us. We can bless each other and we can bless objects we’re using to honor God.

And while this seems complicated, it just goes to show the nature of blessings. Blessings can’t be contained. Blessings can’t even be categorized well. Blessings overflow and cross boundaries and there is the hope that blessings will be paid forward. I’ve always loved Senator Elizabeth Warren’s ideas about all of us being connected, she said:

“There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody. You built a factory out there—good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn’t have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory . . . Now look. You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea—God bless! Keep a hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.”[7]

I love Senator Warren’s ideas here because it just goes to show that we don’t succeed in isolation. We need others to help us along and we need to help others along—we’re all in this life together. Blessings are like being in the splash zone near a water ride or on the outskirts of a water gun fight—you are going to get wet when you’re that close to that much overflowing goodness. Because when we are blessed, it makes us more apt to treat others with respect. We are blessed, we become a blessing. Because being blessed makes us fortunate and humble and then, God willing, compassionate.

There’s a really good children’s story about this. J.K. Rowling, who wrote the Harry Potter books, wrote a collection of short stories called *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. She narrates *The Fountain of Fair Fortune* which speaks to being blessed, and as a result—humble and ultimately compassionate toward other people.

Our story begins that high on a hill in an enchanted garden and enclosed by walls is the Fountain of Fair Fortune. On the Summer Solstice one poor soul can fight their way to the Fountain, bathe in its blessed waters, and receive Fair Fortune forever. Hundreds of people travel from far and wide to try their luck. In our story, three witches find each other on the road and share their tales of woe. Asha is sick of a disease no healer can cure. Altheda was robbed of everything she owned by an evil adversary. And Amata was deserted by the man she loves and fears that her heart will be broken forever. These women agree that they will work together to reach the Fountain of Fair Fortune.

Suddenly there is the first ray of sunlight on the longest day of the year and a small opening appears in the outer wall. Creepers from the garden twist themselves around Asha who grabs Altheda who grabs Amata who becomes caught on the armor of a pathetic-looking knight. All four of them are transported through the wall—Sir Luckless, the knight, is a drag but they continue on their journey. Along the way, they encounter obstacles and each has to make sacrifices.

As they approach the Fountain, Asha falls to the ground due to her illness and Altheda gathers herbs and makes a potion which heals her. Asha is cured and Altheda finds a way to have a livelihood again as a Healer. Amata had to give up her memories of her old love along the way and she finds that she has no regrets, she’s better off without him. None of the

women need the Fountain of Fair Fortune after all, encouraging Sir Luckless to bathe in the blessed waters, and he does—and he can't believe his luck! Sir Luckless comes out of the waters, professes his love for Amata who is the most kind and beautiful woman, and the four friends journey home. "And none of them ever knew or suspected that the Fountain's waters carried no enchantment at all." [8]

You see when all three women received blessings—a cure for a disease, a way to make a living, and hope to move on without the guy who broke your heart, well then they can easily turn to Sir Luckless and encourage him to bathe in the waters and receive his blessing. Yes, it's the blessing they all sought in the first place and journeyed long and scarified to get and yet they found other blessings along the way. That's the beauty of what we're doing here today. We receive blessings in the form of holy water shared from some of the amazing places we have been and backpacks blessed and bikes blessed and food and fellowship blessing us. And after all this abundance, we hopefully feel happy and humbled and we go forth to bless others, we become the blessing. So truly—bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within us, bless God's holy name. God is merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love for us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

[1] James Rowe Adams, "Blessed, Bless, Blessing," in *The Essential Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 2nd Edition, 49.

[2] Genesis 9:1 and Job 42:12.

[3] Psalm 103:1-2.

[4] Psalm 103:8.

[5] Matthew 5:8-9.

[6] Mark 10:16.

[7] Elizabeth Warren, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/439207-there-is-nobody-in-this-country-w...>

[8] J.K. Rowling, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, 34.