

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 5:1-12

Title: Blessing: Can You Take It?

On this All Saints Sunday, as we **recall** and remember those who have come and gone on ahead of us to their heavenly reward, we hear from the late Henri Nouwen on “the life of the beloved”. **God has decided to love us all**, after all, he created us **for Himself**.

At least as early as your baptism, someone was determined to set you on a life course where you would live and love **knowing that God had chosen you for a purpose**. In the sermon last week-end Pr. Martha helped us see more deeply that gift of grace. But, **to live life as one of God’s beloved**, Nouwen says it is **not enough to have been chosen**. To live as a beloved one of God, you and I need to be **given a blessing**, many blessings, and **THEN** we are **equipped to choose life**...the abundant life of which Jesus spoke.

On this day when Scripture lifts up blessing, **What then is blessing**...really? And what does it mean to be “**living blessed**?” Reflecting on the bar mitzvah of a 13 year old boy, Nouwen tells how deeply he was moved by witnessing the blessing given the boy by his parents. “**Son**” the father said, “**whatever will happen to you in your life, whether you will have success or not, become important or not, be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I love you.**” With tears in his eyes, observing the tenderness in the father’s manner, face to face with his son, Nouwen thought, “**What a grace such a blessing is.**”

26 years ago, Minnesota poet Robert Bly published a book about **Iron John**, that hairy “**deep woods**” character from the fairy tales of the Grimm Bros. In one sense the book spoke about the lives of American men **whose lives were devoid** of the crucial “**father-to-son**” **blessing** not given them by their fathers. It was a **blessing that the boy needed** at a critical stage of his development. Bly suggests that many men had qualities that were strong & positive, **but underneath** the charm and bluff, there was, and there remains, **much isolation, deprivation, and passivity**. The book suggests these “**blessing-starved men**” were **endlessly seeking** the father’s blessing that

Esau never got from his father Isaac... at least as was the case for Jacob (who actually was quite a scoundrel himself).

During a three-year period when I served as **correctional chaplain** in Minnesota’s maximum security prison at Oak Park Heights, I visited many men whose **tragic lives, by their own admission**, were devoid of “**the blessing**” from their father. **They were not “living blessed.”** They had **no fatherly blessing** to carry the **Blessing of God** to them. They **did not know** “the truth” of love..., and therefore they **had not been set free to live in blessing**.

I think you’ll agree with me when I suggest that as we walk through life, we realize how much we are **daily victimized by fear, anxiety, and insecurity**...those **visible marks of not “living Blessed.”** Children **need to be blessed** by their parents and **parents by their children**.

We all need each other’s blessings – masters and disciples, rabbis and students, bishops and priests, doctors and patients. We might add: men and women, married and unmarried, employed and unemployed, churched and unchurchd, children and elders, Protestants and Catholics, Muslims and Jews. **Who are we to think that any one person doesn’t need God’s blessing?**

So **what is a “blessing**”...anyway? In Latin, to bless is *benedicere*. The word “**benediction**” that is used in many churches means literally: **speaking (diction) well** (bene) or “**saying good things**” of someone. That speaks to me. **Does it speak to you?** I need to hear good things said of me, and I **know how much you need to hear good things said about you**. Nowadays, we often say, “We have to **affirm** each other.” **Without affirmation, it is hard to live well.** To give some-one a blessing is the most **significant affirmation** we can offer. To give a blessing is “**to affirm**”, to **say yes** to a person’s Belovedess. **Confirmation, as we witnessed last Sunday, is really “Affirmation of Baptism.”**

If you’ve ever played the board game “**Life Stories**” or “**Faith Stories**”, you know how transforming the **individual affirm-ation** at the conclusion of the game can be. Without affirmation, it is **hard to live well**.

Every time I heard Garrison Keillor conclude a daily segment of "**Writer's Almanac**" on NPR, I waited for the words.., "**Be well, Do good work, Keep in Touch**". They are a **benediction**.... one of many available to us ... to **remind us of the hope that someone else shares with/for us.** "*To give a blessing*", Nouwen proclaims, "**creates the reality of which it speaks**". Just think of it..., because you are blessed, **you are able to give blessings to others; you are a co-creator with God..., a source of faith, and hope, and love in this crying world.**

The **blessings** that Jesus gave to his hearers who had believed in him were powerful. It was **difficult for his followers to receive his blessing.** They **couldn't see** how their sin cost them their **freedom to "lived blessed."** Jesus **acknowledged the difficulty** some of the Jews were having in seeing him as God's Son & **how that blindness bound them to Abraham, and not to the Father in heaven.** They **wouldn't and couldn't receive the blessing** Jesus gave them. To them it was more of a curse than a blessing. **Blessings can be given...but they need to be received to bear fruit.**

We too, can be bound to our own ideas of who God should be for us; **what God should be doing** in the world; and **where God is calling us to be.** We **CAN get in the way of the grace in God's blessings to us.** It is true....that **when we listen to others,** and yes **even ourselves,** we can hear much **blaming and complaining** in the spirit of **passive resignation.** It is easy to feel like a **victim of a world** we cannot change.

Nouwen writes, "*The sense of being cursed often comes more easily than the sense of being blessed, and we can find enough arguments to feed it. We can say: Look at what is happening in the world: Look at the starving people, the refugees, the prisoners, the sick and dying... Look at all the poverty, injustice and war.... Look at our daily struggles with our relationships, with our work, with our health...*" **Where, where is the blessing? The feeling of being accursed comes easily. Isn't it easier for us to believe that we are cursed than that we are blessed?"**

Even though Nouwen asked that question 25 years ago, it is **as contemporary as the world events of our current day.** We've **all heard voices** now claiming our **present reality** as clear evidence of the truth of Biblical predictions of the world's end.

Mindful of the **temptation to live as unbeloved,** and **without** God's blessing, Nouwen invites us to consider **two pathways** to "**living blessed**" today. He suggests that **prayer and presence** are the way to fulfill this **deep need** from our heart.

As you reflect on **your prayer life,** I suspect you have already discovered that prayer becomes more and more **a way "to listen to the blessing"**. While you and I are anxious to talk to God about our **wants and desires,** Nouwen says "*the real 'work' of prayer is to become silent and to listen to the voice that says good things about me.*"

In these latter days of the church year, I join Nouwen in **inviting you to develop the discipline of spending one-half hour a day listening to the voice of love.** In doing so, you will **grad-ually discover that something is happening of which you were not even conscious.** It might be **only in retrospect** that you **discover the voice that blesses you.** The **move-ment of God's Spirit** is very gentle, very soft – **hidden.** But it is **persistent, strong and deep.** It **changes hearts** radically.

A **second daily discipline is the cultivation of presence.** It's about **claiming your blessedness** by being **attentive to the blessings that come to you** day after day. The problem of modern living is that we are **too busy – looking for affirm-ation in the wrong places. Too busy to notice that we are being blessed.** Have you ever **given someone a heartfelt compliment...** and then **they brushed it off?** **How** did it make you feel? **I wonder how God feels** when **we fail to receive his blessings?** Perhaps **the fact that few people offer a real blessing** is the sad result of the **absence of people who are willing and able to receive such a blessing.**

It takes strength, **maturity of spirit,** and a heart of love.... to be **able to receive a blessing.** May we be so strengthened. I am thinking that St. Francis was surely thinking of the strength of offering blessings as co-creators with God when he prayed, "Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to (first) console; Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood as to (first) understand; Grant that I may not so much seek to be loved as to (first) love. We receive what we first give to others

Attentive presence: a) the **blessing of the poor** who stop us on the road, b) the **blessings of the blossoming trees and fresh flowers,** c) the **blessings of music, painting,**

sculpture, d) the **blessings brought by words of gratitude**, encouragement, affection and love. The spiritual discipline of **Attentive Presence**. It's worth the effort! It pays BIG dividends.

The late theologian Peter Gomes reflected on the challenge before us: ***"If we took a survey of how people in other faith traditions look at Christians"*** he said, ***"we might observe, on the basis of the way we act and what we say, that they see we are a religious people driven by our anxieties. The fuel of our faith is what we are worried about."*** One can understand how someone

could say that we are driven by our **concerns**, by our **worries**, by our **anxieties**. And so today, as we think about the **Body of Christ and how it is nourished, fed, supported to be healthy and life-giving**, I want to suggest that our health and well-being is **fed by blessing**. The question is: **Can you take blessing.... and live with it?**

A friend and former graduate student now a preacher in the **African Methodist Episcopal Church** in Shreveport, LA, preached a powerful guest sermon entitled, **"After the Benediction!"** In the typical AME tradition, Wayne had our Lutheran congregation **on its feet** responding to **his call** with **the response "After the Benediction."**

The Benediction....**"speaking well"** as we learned to be its meaning. And so now **I invite your active and courageous response this week** to the many **benedictions you will hear....** coming directly to you... **in response to those you have given to others**. And so....., **to encourage the exchange**, I share the words of Aaron, the brother of Moses: **May the Lord bless you and keep you, may he make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, may he look upon you with favor, and give you peace. Amen.**