

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost- September 3, 2023

Scripture lesson: Psalm 103:1-5 & Numbers 6:22-26

## THE WORLD OF BLESSING

Someone sneezes and we say, “God bless you.” We want to express heartfelt thanks to someone and we say, “God bless you.” Many of us have been around long enough, to remember Red Skelton saying to everyone at the end of his TV show, “And may God bless.”

Every U.S. president in my memory has ended a speech saying, “. . . and God bless America.” One of the most time-honored spiritual practices is to “count our many blessings”. There is something old and deep in us that wants to pronounce blessing, receive blessing, and remember blessing.

The Bible attests to that fact. In the creation story in Genesis 1, God blesses all the creatures that God has made- the birds, the fish, the animals, and the human beings. God’s blessing brings them all to *life* and sustains them in *life*. They live and *we* live only through God’s continual blessing. It’s no wonder that our desire for it is *strong*.

Later in the book of Genesis, Jacob tricks his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the fatherly blessing that’s meant for his older brother, Esau. It’s their belief that once this blessing is spoken, it has independent power so that it can never be taken back. Esau is so infuriated by this trickery that he sets out to kill Jacob. Such can be the power of a blessing that’s conferred or a blessing that’s denied.

In the New Testament, when Jesus is baptized, God blesses him, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Throughout his life, Jesus clings to and nestles in God’s blessing. It equips him to embrace and to carry out the extraordinary ministry that God has called him to.

The act of blessing *is* powerful, which may be why today’s passage from the book of Numbers, the one that gives us some of the most famous words of blessing ever written, also gives instruction that only priests, only Aaron and his sons, should offer blessings. It’s as if pronouncing a blessing is such a big deal that it should be left only to professionals.

Think of the specific times of blessing that we traditionally have in our UCC worship services. They’re moments in which I know that I personally feel a unique power that I especially want to take part in. I stop wondering if I’ve left the garage door open. I stop looking ahead to the game that I want to watch this afternoon. I stop putting together my to-do list for the coming week. I sense instead that something of special importance is happening and I engage more fully. I pay closer attention.

For instance, a baby is brought to the baptismal font and the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all. The Holy Spirit be upon you. You are a child of God, a disciple of Christ, a beloved member of the family of faith.” Those words of blessing are *powerful*.

Or in those times when we confirm young people or welcome new members or ordain or commission or affirm people for particular ministries we offer special prayers of blessing for them, often with the laying on of hands. Those moments are *highly charged* in the Spirit.

Or in the benediction at the end of our services, the energy of our worship is gathered up and sent with us because we know, even if we seldom articulate it to ourselves, that as we go from here, we *need* God's blessing upon us every day. We have to have it, so we leave this place with words of blessing ringing in our souls.

The narrator in Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, is a minister named John Ames. He writes to his young son and speaks of how grateful he is that as a pastor he frequently gets to bless people. He assures his son that no one has to be a minister in order to offer such blessings, but that if you are one it's easier because "people expect it of you."

In affirming that anyone can offer a blessing, John Ames shows that he's a Christian in our Protestant tradition and not a priest in the ancient tabernacle tradition that the book of Numbers reflects. But what is it that we think we're doing when we speak blessings? As Protestants, we understand ourselves to be calling upon God's life-giving Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit is present and available to everyone, so we teach that anyone can offer a blessing. It isn't something that only pros can do because the power of blessing doesn't belong to special individuals. It comes to *all* of us from God.

All of us can invoke God's blessing. All of us can channel it. We can speak God's blessing with power because it's carried along on the wings of God's Spirit. We can be messengers of it, but never its source because it always comes to us from God from whom all blessings flow. We, however, can pass it on.

In today's first Scripture reading, when the psalmist says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," it might sound like we can bless on our own, but even in this case we still have no power to bless apart from God. To bless God is to give hearty thanks to God for the blessings that we've received from God. We echo back in gratitude the sweetness of the blessings that God has given to us.

Yet unlike God, we, as both Scripture and our worship remind us, absolutely *need* to speak, to receive, and to share God's blessing. Despite that fact, though, we seldom do it enough. That might be because we so easily forget that our fellow human beings, and perhaps especially those closest to us and that we care about the most, frequently *yearn* for blessing.

So, we regularly give our children instruction and advice. We offer our friends a listening ear. We deliver our siblings in the faith who've come home from the hospital a fine, home-cooked meal. We provide our aging parents with special support, and we give to our spouse our loyal and devoted commitment.

But while faithfully giving these good gifts, we also often forget that what our loved ones need the most, what in some cases they may in fact be dying of hunger for, is the assurance of God's blessing upon them. UCC minister and author Tony Robinson tells this story from his life:

"I remember how long I waited before receiving a blessing from my father. As he got older, he began suffering from Alzheimer's disease. During his last three years he lived in a small facility with twenty others in various stages of that illness. The summer before he died, my wife and I were there for a visit. The three of us were walking together arm in arm, my wife and I on either side of him. We moved at his slow pace across the dining room toward the door, which led to an enclosed garden. By this time my dad seldom said much that made sense to us. Even his words had become difficult to understand (as) his speech often (was) slurred. (But) as we crossed the dining room his slippered shuffle drew to a halt. Bent over, he looked up at me and clear as a bell said, "You are a good man." Then he resumed his shuffle toward the door.

“My wife said, ‘Did you hear that?’ She didn’t mean, ‘Did you hear the words he said?’ She meant, ‘Did you hear, really hear, what he was trying to say to you?’ Yes, I did. It was my father’s blessing. Three months later, he died.”

Tony Robinson’s father assured him that he was a good man. He assured him that he was God’s good creation, and that his life was a cherished gift both to his father and to this world. That’s a huge part of what it means to bless each other, to remind one another that God’s blessing is indeed upon us.

There might be many of us who feel that we’re still waiting to receive a blessing like that from someone dear to us. There might be some of us who, as parents, would hop onto the next plane and fly across the country, if we thought it would mean that we would receive such a blessing from one of our children. For we long to hear, especially from those close to us, that we are good people, that we are God’s good creation, and that our lives are a cherished gift both to our families and to this world.

I recently read the story of a mother who as the last thing before sending her children off to school would put her hand on each child’s head and say, “God bless and keep you today.” She wanted her children to know that even though she wouldn’t be with them during the hours ahead, God would be. Even more, she wanted them to understand that a much greater love than hers was always with them. Even when she wasn’t there and even when her own love for them faltered, which she knew it certainly did, she wanted her children to know that God’s love was always with them.

That is what we yearn for. We crave to feel in the center of our souls that in, with, through, under, and beyond the love of our families and of other people is the very love of *God*. We’re painfully aware that our own love for one another can, does, and often will fail. That’s why we need so intensely those unwavering reminders of God’s love, those reminders that come to us as the other huge part of what it means to give blessing.

Forgetting how much we need this assurance is one reason that we bless each other too little. Another main reason, I think, is that we often feel that few, if any, people actually deserve to be fully blessed.

A blessing in the Celtic tradition goes like this: “May those who love us, love us. And may those who don’t love us turn their hearts; and if they don’t turn their hearts, may they turn their ankles, so we’ll know them by their limping.” That captures, I think, the kind of half-blessing that we’re usually inclined to give. It’s a blessing coupled with a curse because we want to bless people if they’re good to us, but curse them if they’re not.

My wife, Kathy, grew up in the southern part of this country, in the great state of Texas. From her I’ve learned of a remarkable Southern tradition, one that drove her crazy when it was misused, which it easily can be. Among certain genteel Southerners this tradition allows you to say things sharply critical of or unkind about other people behind their backs so long as you add the phrase, “Bless her heart” or “Bless his heart.”

For example, “He’s such a selfish, grinchy, and ungrateful little man. Bless his heart.”

It’s easy to see how this tradition could be grossly abused, casually allowing all sorts of ugly gossip and backbiting. Yet I wonder if it might actually have its origins in a profound realization. If to our criticism we *sincerely* add, “Bless her heart” or “Bless his heart”, we end up asking God to do something which at the moment we find ourselves unable to do- namely, to see this person as a good man or a good woman, as God’s good creation whose life is a cherished gift

both to us and to this world. Blessing their hearts, we invoke God's love for them because we know that our own love is failing.

In closing, we remember again that our power to bless each other comes from God. We can be channels of God's blessing upon us, but never its source because it comes to us from God from whom all blessings flow. God blesses us by bringing us to and sustaining us in this life; God blesses us by pronouncing our creation good; God blesses us with the love of each other in, with, through, under, and beyond which is always God's love for us- the one love that does not fail.

Ready to pass on this life-giving gift, we faithfully ask, "Who in our life needs blessing today?" Amen.