

“*Blessing the World*” Communion Sunday at EUMC 7-6-08
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James texts: Luke 24:36-53 & I Peter 3:8-11

I begin, this morning, with a passage from a favorite novel, entitled *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. Its story is told through the voice of an old country preacher, looking back on his life in a small Midwestern town. Here is one of his recollections:

We were very pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town, and this affected our behavior considerably. Once, **we baptized a litter of cats**. They were dusty little barn cats just steady on their legs... We were always pleased to find new kittens prowling out of whatever cranny their mother had tried to hide them in, as ready to play as we were.

It occurred to one of the girls to swaddle them up in a doll’s dress---there was only one dress, which was just as well, since the cats could hardly tolerate a moment in it and would have to be unswaddled as soon as they were christened, in any case. I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula.

Their grim old crooked-tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek, and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a good deal....

I still remember how those little warm brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of **blessing** it, is a very different thing....

There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It **doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that** . I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really *knowing* a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time... Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position.ⁱ

Those children of Gilead got it right. As the old preacher puts it, blessing “doesn’t enhance sacredness, but acknowledges it, and there is a power in that.” A blessing passes through you, which is one of the best things about being a minister. I get to experience that at baptisms, at the communion table, and in the benediction at the end of worship. Quite often, at such times, I feel a power flowing through my hands, literally making my palms hot. But as the children of Gilead knew, you don’t have to be a minister to confer a blessing. **All of us are called to be blessings to one another.**

Turn to our text for this morning. The apostle Peter is writing to the early Christians in Asia Minor, who are experiencing persecution. Peter says to them, “Do not return evil for evil, or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary, **bless** , for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

This passage refers back to Jesus' teaching, recorded in the gospels: "Do not return evil for evil; but on the contrary, love your enemies...**Bless and do not curse** those who do evil to you." The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, paraphrases Jesus, saying, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." Peter is recapitulating both of these when he writes, "Do not return evil for evil; but bless; to this you were called." Over and over again in the New Testament, we are called to bless others.

That's our calling, as Christians, to bless and not curse.

And in case the words "blessing" and "curse" sound old-fashioned or superstitious to you, consider this. In one of his novels, John Updike writes, "We take our bearings daily from other people." That is, you tell someone over and over that they are a failure, or that they won't amount to much, and sure enough, they'll begin to act that way. You treat someone as if they are not attractive, and soon they'll stop trying to *be* attractive. You tell a young child that he or she is no good, and chances are that child will grow up so as not to disappoint you.

Do you know what you've done when you do that? You've **cursed** that child. You haven't uttered voodoo, you haven't stuck a pin in a doll, but you have effectively put a curse upon them. The child who grows up feeling worthless, or stupid, or unlovable has been cursed, and may carry it always. They may never overcome it.

On the other hand, you tell somebody that they are made in God's image, that God loves them, that they have the potential for greatness, but that they can also fail and the earth won't come to an end, because we all make mistakes...and chances are they will keep on trying, and eventually succeed in life. When you do that, you have given them a blessing.

Or you tell a child that they are unique, that what they have to offer is unlike what anybody else can offer, and therefore it will be received and celebrated. It won't be endlessly measured against other people's talents or gifts. When you communicate that to children, you bless them. You are mediating God's grace to them. They will be **blessed**, and their lives will blossom.

We are all made in the image of God. We are all born with great dignity and beauty. But humans are social beings. We need other people---parents, teachers, preachers, friends, communities of faith---to acknowledge and actualize our sacred worth. We need others to tell us who we are---that we are beloved children of God---and to treat us that way.

We take our bearings daily from other people. ⁱⁱ

This is what the Bible means by the injunction to "bless, and not curse." **To bless others is to help them see themselves as God sees them**, to communicate God's love for them. Everything Jesus did, in his actions toward others, was toward this end. He called a tax collector down from a tree; he invited a bent-over woman to stand tall; he ate with prostitutes and sinners. He forgave people, healed people, lifted them up. He took little children into his arms, and blessed them.

In today's text, Peter goes so far as to say, "Bless and do not curse, for to this you have been called." You know what he is doing here? He's defining what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian---our calling, as he puts it---**is to bless the world.** And in the preceding verse, **Peter suggests how** we can do that. He says: have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. It's those last two characteristics I want to highlight this morning, because they summarize the others. If you have a tender heart and a humble mind, you will be a blessing to the world.

First, **a tender heart.** The Greek word in our text can also be translated as "compassion." The word "compassion" is formed from the parts "com," meaning "with," and "passion," meaning "to feel" or "to suffer." **Compassion** literally means to "feel with," or "to suffer with" another person. It means that you are able to feel what others are feeling, and to feel deeply the suffering of the world.

Sometimes, in our society, you hear the term, "bleeding hearts." It's used pejoratively, mostly. To call someone a "bleeding heart" usually means that you regard them as weak, naïve, and overly emotional. I remind you that the source of this image is Catholic piety, which sometimes pictures Jesus with an open heart on his tunic, a heart that is bleeding.

Those paintings may not be the best art in the world, but they are meant to reveal that Jesus, our Lord, was tender-hearted. So tender-hearted that he didn't condemn anyone. He knew that everyone carries a heavy burden. He looked beyond the externals of everyone's life, and knew what they were going through, what they were living with. And he responded with compassion. That's how we are to be, too, tender-hearted, moved to acts of compassion, becoming a blessing to the world.

The second characteristic that Peter lifts up is **a humble mind.** Now, you can probably think of several people you would nominate for the "Humble Mind Award." But it doesn't mean what you might think.

Again, Peter is building on an earlier part of scripture, the letter to the Philippians, where Paul writes, "Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself---humbled himself---and took on the form of a servant."

That is to say, Jesus left heaven behind and joined us here, became one of us, and lived the kind of life that we must live, with all our limitations and vulnerabilities. *We* live in a world where the Kingdom of God is not yet fully arrived. There is still pain for which there is no explanation, and evil that doesn't make sense.

Our temptation, as Christians, is sometimes to approach this world as if the Kingdom of God *were* fully here now, as if everything is clear to us, and there are easy answers to the hard questions of life. There are Christians, as you know, who go into situations where people are suffering, say, and only compound the suffering by saying something pious and glib, like that it is God's will that these terrible things are happening.

Fred Craddock tells of the time that he went home for his mother's funeral. His sister had taken care of their mother in the last years of her life, and the death was very hard for her. After the funeral, friends brought food to the house. One woman came up to Fred's sister and said something like, "She's better off now in heaven," impervious to the emptiness that such a loss can bring. His sister didn't say anything. But Craddock went up to the woman and said, "It's obvious that you have never lost your mother."

Jesus did not come to give us answers, not mostly. He came to give us himself. He didn't come to give us some passport into a perfect life. He came to be here with us in this life, humbled himself to be with us, and took the form of a servant.

To "have a humble mind" means that we are to do the same. It means leaving the safe world of certainty, and dwelling where sufferers must live. It means making a pot of tea, maybe, or just sitting quietly in the hospital room, or across the kitchen table, **being lovingly present**. If you can do that, you will be a channel of blessing.

I came across a tribute written for Charles Hartshorne, the great process theologian, on the occasion of his 100th birthday. The person giving the tribute was a graduate student who had once walked with Hartshorne and another student across campus. She recalled, "We passed along the way, noticing the plants, the birds, the sweet spring air. At the threshold where we parted, Charles turned around, took our hands in his, looked at us squarely in the eye, and said, '**Be a blessing to the world.**' One is rarely given such a direct instruction, and it went straight to our hearts."ⁱⁱⁱ

I Peter gives the same instruction, simply and directly. Love the world with a tender heart. Serve the world with a humble mind. Let God's grace flow through you into everyone you meet. Then you will be a blessing. **To this you have been called.**

Amen.

ⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) pp. 21-23

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to my former pastor in San Diego, the Rev. Mark Trotter, for ideas here and for the way this part of the sermon is organized. See his sermon, "How to be a Blessing," May 9, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rebecca Parker, *Blessing the World* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2006) p. 161