

Sunday, July 7, 2024

Bless You!

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SERMON (BRING A CANDLE AND A LIGHTER)

A couple of years ago now, I began **lighting what is known as a “Temenos candle”** at the beginning of sessions, retreats, and workshops I would lead.

And so to explain a bit about that...when I was pursuing my doctorate in Spiritual Guidance, I **had a professor** who would do this very thing. This is where I first learned about this word “*Temenos*,” a **Greek word**, made popular by **Carl Jung**, to describe a space as **special or set a part**. Temenos spaces are places where we can enter into:

- Greater wholeness
- Deeper peace
- And abundant joy

They are places where **healing and transformation** can take place.

And so my professor would begin our times together by lighting a candle while saying, *“I light the Temenos candle, claiming our space and time together as sacred and set apart, as we come together in order to hear and tell our stories.”*

After watching her do this a few times, it occurred to me that I, too, would like to incorporate this practice. And so **today – we begin by lighting the Temenos Candle**, *acknowledging that the space and time between us is sacred and set apart as we come together to both hear and tell and talk about the story of life.*

Today we come together to consider the **topic of blessing**.

And to give you a bit of background on that:

This came about because of a “**Forum for All**” that Lisa Carroll and I co-led on behalf of the Outreach Committee a couple of months ago on the subject of being a **Matthew 25 church**, for which, we spent some time with the key verses from Matthew 25, asking ourselves:

- What words in this passage stand out to me?
- What in my life is causing these words to come forward at this time?
- What do these words prompt in me?

And out of that, we heard **numerous questions** about the passage – one of which was:

- **What is “blessing?”**

And, while it may seem like a basically easy word to understand, in fact, there’s good reason for us to consider the word more carefully.

So maybe first, some context. In Matthew, chapter 25 and verse 34 we hear this:

Matthew 25:34-40 (NRSVUE)

³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,

The passage tells us that we are being **invited to come**.

Another **translation** of this passage – the **Easy to Read Version** says:

"My Father has great blessings for you. The Kingdom he promised is now yours."

And so what we hear is:

- Come.
- Receive the blessing.
- Inherit the Kingdom prepared for us...

And if we **trace the biblical context** of this word "*blessing*," we find that there's a bit of a trajectory. It's **meaning changes** a bit over time.

For instance as we heard in Genesis 12 earlier, the passage tells us things like:

- I will bless you.
- You will be a blessing.
- I will bless those who bless you.
- In you...all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

And all of this is told to Abram in the **context of Abram aligning himself with the heart and mind of God** – which is something we'll need to talk about.

- How do we know that we're attuning ourselves to the will of God?

But sticking with the interaction between Abram and God for a moment, God tells Abram that **his actions will result in Divine favor**...favor that seems to refer to **material** sorts of **things**:

- I'll make you a great nation.
- I'll make your name great.

For this reason, to this day, we tend to hear people refer to things like:

- Getting all green lights
- Getting an unexpected bonus at work...

...as being blessed. We tend to **easily associate blessing with material things**.

But as time goes on, there is a **shift** in the **use of the word blessing, from material things spiritual things**.

We see this already in **Matthew 25** when Jesus talks about inheriting the Kingdom of God.

But by the time **Paul** begins his ministry, it's **even more apparent**.

Paul **doesn't tell us** that we **have to do** something. Paul says:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,**

"Has blessed."

It's a done deal. But not necessarily with stuff.

Paul says, "You've been blessed with *Every Spiritual Blessing*."

And in verse 13 and 14 Paul says You were...:

marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is **the pledge of our inheritance** toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

...an inheritance obtained *in Christ* and *according to God's will and purpose*.

The thing that **appeared to be a material blessing turns out to be a spiritual blessing** – *a pouring out of favor*.

And so, in one way, it seems fair to say that we are able to experience these moment-by-moment blessings in some sort of tangible way. We experience feelings of gratitude, for instance.

And also – at the same time, it's so **much more than that**:

- It's a sense of **Divine connection**.
- It's a **feeling of abundance** even in the smallest of things
- It's an experience where we don't just *know something intellectually*.

Many often talk of the **Mind, the Body, and the Spirit**.

The **mind can learn** about the **meaning** of blessing. What we learn with our minds, however, begins to come alive in us **when we feel it**:

- When our **hearts overflow**...
 - o At the sight of painted clouds or birds chasing one another through the tree
 - o When we watch little ones sleep
 - o When our eyes meet the eyes of another, and we feel love

It comes alive when the **fruits of the Spirit overflow in us** –

- When we **reflexively respond** to **help another**
- When we **feel sadness** and we **reach out to God for comfort**
- Sometimes we call this *doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly* with our God.

We may **feel that sense of Divine favor** when we're **blessing another** – acknowledging their specialness and Divine nature by showering them with blessing...

But not only when we're giving. Our own preciousness is reflected back to us when we're the ones being blessed.

And as Jesus so famously talks about in what has come to be called "**the Beatitudes**," we're blessed when others **come against us**, when we **experience persecutions** of every kind, when we are **down-hearted**...

And this **can seem strange** on one hand, particularly so when we're doing well and having an **Abram** sort of experience. In those moments it can be **difficult to imagine** *how* we can also **be blessed** when we're **not experiencing** these **material blessings**.

To help us with that, perhaps one helpful point is to be **able to acknowledge** that there are **meaningful distinctions** between **our physical** world and the **spiritual world**.

What we **hear in Scripture** is that, sometimes our **physical reality right now** *doesn't quite match* our **spiritual reality**. The Bible does promise us that **one day**, *every tear will be wiped away*, that the **devil will be fully bound** and **unable to do any more harm**.

But *even when things don't go our way in this world* – and surely they don't always go our way (!) – we are **still blessed** with **every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places**. We have *already inherited the Kingdom of heaven prepared for us from the very foundation of the world*.

It is the **love of God**, **poured out** and **evidenced through Christ**, evidenced by the **presence of the Holy Spirit** in our midst *as a downpayment of things yet to come*, and evidenced by **so many others** who **follow this path of love**. It's the **love of God**, **poured into us** *beyond what we can possibly contain*, to the point that it **has to pour out of us** and **flow into the world around us**.

But perhaps the **most important thing** to keep in mind...is that this blessing...this divine favor...**is an extension of grace**. **We don't earn it**. It's **offered freely** and it **pours out freely**. It's **unbounded**.

And so...do we **feel blessed by material things**? Yes. We do.

Those material things, similar to the Holy Spirit, **become evidence** of something in the **spiritual realm** that feels harder to see with our eyes.

These material things are good enough, as we've talked about today. But what is good and very good is this **spiritual blessing**. This **unearned Divine Favor** and promise that goes far beyond what we even can fully understand.

And so, maybe before we move on today, why don't we take a moment...Look around you find someone you can share with...and we'll take about a minute for each person...

- Share with them something that has felt like a blessing to you.
- And now switch
- Prayer