

In Search of Blessing

Genesis 12: 1-3
Luke 10: 1-6
Luke 24: 50-53

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May 9, 2010

There was once a little girl who visited her grandfather every Friday afternoon. Her grandfather had been a great rabbi in the old country, a scholar of the mystical teachings of Judaism known as the Kabbalah. But to a small girl, he was simply the one who seemed to love her more than anyone else.

They would have tea together in the kitchen. And afterwards, he would have a word with God in Hebrew. Then, this child would wait patiently for what she had come to look forward to as the best part of her week. Here is how she remembers that time:

When Grandpa finished talking to God, he would turn to me and say, "Come, Neshume-le." Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on top of my head. He would begin by thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically mention my struggles during that week and tell God something about me that was true. Each week I would wait to find out what that was.

...My grandfather died when I was seven years old. I had never lived in a world without him in it before, and it was hard for me. He had looked at me as no one else had and called me by a special name, "Neshume-le" which means "beloved little soul." There was no one left to call me this anymore. At first I was afraid that without him to see me and tell God who I was, I might disappear. But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his eyes. And that once blessed, we are blessed forever."

(Remen, **My Grandfather's Blessing**, Riverhead Books, 2000, p.23)

That little girl, Rachel Naomi Remen, went on to become a cancer physician, counselor, and a master storyteller. Her book, "My Grandfather's Blessings" is filled with stories of people, who like her grandfather, have blessed her in seen and unseen ways.

Rachel Remen uses the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* to explain the power of blessing. In the sixteenth century, the great rabbi, Isaac Luria, told a new version of creation story, one that is like a mystical version of the Big Bang theory. In the beginning, there was God, who was Pure Being, the Source of all that is. God poured Divine Light into a vessel at the beginning of time, but a cosmic accident occurred. The vessel holding this Holy Light shattered, scattering the light of God throughout the universe in the form of holy sparks. These countless sparks of holiness are hidden deep in everyone and everything.

The purpose of human life, said Rabbi Luria, is to uncover these sparks of light and restore the world to its original wholeness. Everyone and everything we encounter contains this light. Our task is to help free this hidden holiness through our compassion. Every act of kindness repairs the world, and together, we all share in the collective work of restoring and repairing the world. As Remen's grandfather told her, this means there is value in every life. "We need to remember to bless the life around us and within us, Neshume-le", he would tell her. "When we bless life, we restore the world." (*Remen, p. 327*)

Other ancient cultures and religions also hold to this grounding truth of recognizing holiness in every life, speaking to it, and strengthening it. In India one greets another with a bow and the word, “Namaste”, which literally means “I see the Divine Spark in you”, or “I greet God within you”.

How do we greet God in one another? How do we speak to the Light within someone else? How do we offer blessing? The poet, Marge Piercy, gives us one answer. Blessing others requires that we give our attention. As Piercy writes in her poem, *The Art of Blessing the Day*, “Attention is love, what we must give children, mothers, fathers, pets, our friends, the news, the woes of others.”

When we bless others, we notice them, affirming that their lives have meaning and worth. We are saying to them that we recognize their uniqueness, just as God does. By offering them our attention and our compassion, we are offering them a “safe place from an indifferent world.” (*Remen*, p. 6).

“Bless whatever you can” writes Piercy, “with eyes and hands and tongue.”

Jesus sent out his disciples to travel far and wide telling those who would listen about the invisible kingdom of God that was already in their midst. The disciples were told to travel lightly and to stay in the homes of strangers. The first words they were to speak upon entering the house of someone they did not know were words of blessing: “Peace be upon this house”. These were words of great power, a gift to the families who gave them shelter.

There have been many times in my own life when someone has spoken a blessing, a word of great power, to me. Often, the person may have been unaware of the impact she has had. But these words of blessing have dropped like rain into thirsty ground. They have strengthened my soul.

When I was graduating from college and about to go to seminary, I visited with my great-grandmother who was nearing the age of 100 at the time. As was usually the case, her daughter, my grandmother, and three of my grandmother’s sisters, were also there. After dinner, the conversation turned to my intention to go to seminary and then to the topic of women pastors.

I remember Aunt Rossie saying quite firmly that it just wasn’t *right* for a woman to be a minister. Women didn’t have the authority, the right voice, or the proper demeanor for such an important role. And, Aunt Rossie just couldn’t imagine herself getting spiritual counsel from a female pastor. It didn’t feel right to her.

Some of the other aunts made murmurings of assent, or at best, noncommittal statements like “Well.. I just don’t know...I’m not sure it’s biblical”, or the time-honored favorite, “How would she have time for her husband and children?” The other aunts were also wary of disagreeing with their older sister. After all, Aunt Rossie was a force to be reckoned with! But, I remember that when there was a pause in the conversation, my great-grandmother looked straight at me and said that she thought it was “just fine!” She said she would be quite happy with a woman pastor and wished me well in my theological studies. I looked at her and smiled. She had given me a blessing, words of power. Something inside me was watered that day and stood up a bit straighter. Aunt Rossie didn’t say anymore after that. And, many years later, my grandmother, and later still, my Aunt Glenda, asked me to officiate at their funerals.

Words of encouragement, affirmation, comfort, peace. There is always something to bless in another person. How many times, though, have we failed to do this. How many times have we remained silent or even spoken critically when we could have offered a blessing!

In Rachel Remen's book, she describes how her Friday afternoons with her grandfather were different from the rest of her week when she felt pressure from her parents, both health professionals, to study hard and do well. Neither her mother nor father was religious, but both had great expectations for Rachel, their only child. Rachel says she remembers growing up feeling that she had to be perfect, that whatever she did was never enough. Therefore, the times with her grandfather were a refuge of sorts. When he placed his hands on her head, when he spoke blessings that affirmed the good parts of herself, she believed that she didn't have to be someone other than who she was.

Later when Rachel's mother was old and ill, Rachel told her of her grandfather's blessings and what they had meant to her. Her mother smiled sadly and said, "I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel. I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud." (*Remen, p. 24*).

We all should find the wisdom to bless others more often by saying powerful words out loud. "Bless whatever you can," says Piercy, "with eyes and hands and tongue."

In the book of Genesis, God tells Abraham that because he has been blessed, he will be a blessing to others. Blessing is always relational. But this involves more than just our individual interactions with friends, family, and those we meet in our day to day lives. Blessing is what we also do in a wider sphere. It is the attention we give to those we may never see, the acts of creativity and justice and reconciliation that help restore and repair the world. We cannot bless if we do not give attention to the structures and systems which make other people objects, rather than subjects. We cannot bless if we ignore the economic or political landscapes which affect how others live and work.

Today is Mother's Day, and it is a time when we remember those who have nurtured and cared for us. It is interesting, however, to remember that this holiday did not originate as a sentimental Hallmark occasion. Rather, it began in 1870 as a rallying cry for mothers who lost husbands and sons in the U.S. Civil War. A proclamation was penned by Julia Ward Howe in Boston as a renunciation of war, militarism and patriarchy. In that original Mother's Day proclamation she wrote:

"Arise then, women of this day!
Arise all women who have hearts,....
Say firmly:
"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We women of one country
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

When we, too, reach out our hands in peace to those who were formerly enemies, we are bringing blessing and beauty to the world.

Blessing is intrinsically relational. It is what we ourselves are seeking, and also what we must offer to others. Giving blessing to another can be done with words, actions, or simply by touch. In Biblical times, putting hands on another person was a symbol of blessing. If God could bless Abraham, then Abraham in turn could be a blessing to others. One touched another person to symbolize a physical and spiritual transfer of holiness, healing, and good things.

And so, throughout the Bible, a father lays his hands on the head of his son, a teacher on the head of a student, a prophet on the disciple. Jesus places his hands on young children or on those who came to him seeking healing. In the early church, it became custom for a priest to lay hands on the heads of a couple being married, a baby being baptized, or a young person seeking ordination. Here at Elon, we continue that ancient custom when we ordain new deacons or one who has experienced a call to ministry.

Even without actual touch, raising one's arms with hands outstretched is the posture of blessing. It is what ministers do when offering a benediction. In Hindu traditions, there are yoga poses called blessing postures. And in the ancient art of other cultures, figures with outstretched arms were universally recognized as symbols of blessing and protection. When one is blessed, one feels safe, no matter what the future holds. Blessing is not an immunity from pain or suffering. It is a reminder on a deep level that we are not alone, and that ultimately, all will be well.

This Sunday is Ascension Sunday, a day when we remember Jesus ascending into the heavens. It is significant that the last act of the risen Christ in Luke's gospel is one where he raises his arms and blesses the disciples who will be left behind to carry on. Even though the verses say that Christ "withdrew from them", the gospel ends with the disciples traveling back to Jerusalem with great joy, eager to praise God and to continue the special kind of loving, kingdom-building work that Jesus had begun. In a sense, the final blessing from Jesus reminded them of their own inner light. They were strengthened and ready to get about the work of repairing and restoring what is broken in the world.

When I was in Germany four years ago as part of an exchange between the Southern Conference and our sister church in the Rhineland, I bought the necklace I am wearing at a bookstore run by the German church. At first glance, this pendant appears to be a stylized, modern cross, but upon closer examination, one is not quite sure. It also looks like a figure with upraised arms in a blessing posture. The card accompanying the necklace says

***This Cross of Blessings reminds us of the Promise of God, who said:
I will bless you and you shall be a Blessing.
It unites three things:
The sorrow of the Crucifixion
The joy of the Resurrection
And the great gesture of the One Who Blesses.
The Cross of Blessing will accompany the people and tell them:
Wherever you are, you are not alone.***

When I bought this necklace, I wondered if I were in search of a blessing. And then, I realized that we all are. We seek to be truly seen. We yearn for a reminder of who we really are. We crave compassion, focused attention, a hand laid on our heads.

And, sometimes we learn that it is by giving blessings that we receive them. We all have the capacity and the power to bless. We can choose our own postures, with arms outstretched, rather than crossed, or with hands open rather than fists clenched in anger. We can put peace into each

other's hands. We can speak words of power that can straighten one who is bent over. We can be priests to each other.

May we find many ways to say, and do, this ancient benediction of Aaron, the brother of Moses:

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord's face shine upon you
And be gracious to you.
And may God's face be revealed to you
and bring you peace. Amen.**