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What the World Needs Now...Is Blessing

SHELLEY G. NEILSON

This evening the family room of the Ewing home is sacred space. Seated on couch, dining room chairs, folding chairs, and spilling onto the floor are members of a sanctified assembly, gathered to participate in a holy event. On one wall hangs an oversized, handmade quilt. On each block are representations of homes. On the back the words, "Blessings for your home," are written in fine script above Jer 29:11-13.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.

It is a fitting banner for this place, which on this occasion is consecrated by our intention to participate in God's work of blessing. The air is rich with the aromas of home and hearth. The fragrance of coffee, sliced fruit, and freshly baked pies foretell the modest feast with which we will celebrate and ratify the ceremony about to take place.

The focus of all our attention is a tiny baby. Six weeks old, at his mother's breast, he nurses contentedly. He is in no hurry. We will wait. Wait until he is satisfied, good and ready to receive that which is in store for him. A showering of blessings beyond his wildest imagination, or is it?

Speaking of imagination:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1-3)

What a promise! Was Abram ready to receive a blessing of such magnitude from the Lord God Almighty? God seemed to think so. The father of a great nation? Was it beyond Abram's wildest imagination? I think not, at least not initially, for "Abram went, as the Lord had told him." He left the security of homeland and extended family, took his barren wife and set forth to go to the land of Canaan. And when, near Shechem, the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land," Abram built an altar and "called on the name of the Lord."

Throughout the account of God's relationship with Abram (in chapter 17 named Abraham, father of a multitude) God repeats his promise to make Abraham "a great nation." "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth" (13:16). "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able, so shall your descendants be" (15:5). "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and the father of a multitude of nations" (17:6).

But God's covenant with Abraham is not merely a prediction regarding the prolific reproduction of his descendants. It is a calling to a "vocation of transformation."¹ And nothing less than transformation, it seems, will be required to redeem humankind.

After the breathtaking wonder and majesty of God's creative work in the first two chapters of Genesis, we find ourselves gasping as we recognize in chapters 3-11 the all too familiar struggles against powers and principalities that challenge God's purposes for his creation. Creation: "willed, gifted and governed by Yahweh, and made for glad dependence and fruitful obedience to Yahweh;"² "a place of abundance, productivity, extravagance—all terms summed up in the word *blessing*."³ Creation, distorted by human self-centeredness and striking discordant notes that disrupt the harmony of God's symphonic creation

We are called to serve as a conduit for the transforming love of Christ. But how do we channel that love?

But God is sovereign. His commitment to bless his creation is steadfast and sure. With faithful intent, he selects one person, Abram, to become Abraham, the father of a nation, Israel. This nation will be blessed and kept by God, a people upon whom God's face will shine and to whom he will give peace. Why? *So that* God's way may be known

upon the earth; *so that* his saving power will be acknowledged by all nations; *so that*, all the nations will praise the Lord (Psalm 67).

The promise to Abraham was purposeful. As descendants by faith of Abraham (Acts 3) and as chosen people, members of a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2) we share that purpose. Our commission is to bear witness to, to mediate the continuing presence of God in the world by continuing the work of blessing to which Abraham was called. And oh, how our world needs blessing.

There is an old Burt Bacharach song from the 1960s that still plays on "oldies" stations. The familiar strains linger in the mind: "What the world needs now, is love sweet love; it's the only thing that there's just too little of." Jesus himself asserts that the two greatest commandments are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:38,39) Certainly there is enough evidence that love—love that is patient and kind, endures, believes, and hopes all things—is in short supply in our world.

However, I suggest that the love the world needs now is the love that finds its source in the heart of God—*hesed*, covenant love. The steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases. Only *that* love has the tenderness to heal, the strength to endure, the power to transform.

We are daily confronted with frustrated men, angry women, rebellious youths, and neglected children. Rejected, dejected, depressed, oppressed, purposeless, "not OK" people are searching for what we, the body of Christ, can offer if we accept the "vocation of transformation" to which we are called. As Israel was called to be a light to the nations, we, as members of Christ's spiritual kingdom, are similarly called to be light and to serve as a conduit for the transforming love of Christ. How do we channel that love?

One way is to embrace our role as agents of blessing in our churches and in the world. We can extend mercy, acceptance, hope, and freedom to challenge the forces "at work in the world seeking to make impossible the life of blessing willed by Yahweh."⁴

What is this life of blessing? If we survey the use of the term "bless" in Genesis, we discover that it has more than one application. God blesses his creation and says to all living creatures "be fruitful and multiply." God promises to bless Abraham, which includes the fruitfulness of his progeny, but there is more to it than that. Abraham is to be a blessing; the nations are to be blessed through him!

Melchizedek blesses Abraham. Melchizedek blesses God. The blessing to Abraham is repeated to his descendants. Isaac is blessed by God, so too, Ishmael. Jacob is blessed by God. Fathers bless sons and grandsons, at times using authorizing language that refers to the name of Yahweh, sometimes not mentioning

God at all. Jacob, the supplanter, extorts a blessing from a supernatural wrestling opponent and later receives the blessing of embrace, freely given, by his disenfranchised brother Esau. In Egypt, God blesses the Egyptian house in which Joseph serves. Joseph was not blessed by his brothers but sold into slavery. When Jacob is brought to Egypt, he blesses Pharaoh, and the Hebrew people are obviously blessed for they "were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly."

The language of blessing in Genesis is frequent, its application, diverse. What can we take from these disparate accounts to assist us in understanding the role, intent or consequence of blessing and how the church can function as mediators of blessing in the world today?

Attempts to trace a line by following the language of blessing in Genesis does not yield a clear path to help us. But, if we resist the impulse to identify a particular form or construct an authoritative pattern for the practice of blessing, we can appreciate what it means to be in relationship with a God who blesses. We can, out of our experience, frame the story of Abraham and Israel within the gospel story and explore the significance of blessing and what it is intended to communicate and accomplish for our lives.

Claus Westermann points out that the language and practice of blessing is intricately interwoven with the history of God's people. If we thumb through the annals of religious history, we find that the practice of blessing has consistently retained a close connection with the perceived activity of God in the world. It is present in both ancient and modern worship, visible in liturgy and ritual. The significance of blessing is seen in the academy and the fine arts, in cathedrals and homes. The simple practice of blessing the food at meal-times is an enduring example that demonstrates some typical elements of blessing that are recognizable in the Genesis accounts: word and action. A striking example of this union (of word and action) is seen in the historical practice of making the sign of the cross.

Consider this, the German word *segnen* means "to bless" and that word is derived from the Latin word *signare*, "to make the sign of the cross," "to cross oneself". To cross oneself, it seems, was conceived as an act of blessing, calling on Christ who died on the cross for us. But its practice also reveals that this action does not simply call on the cross as a symbol of the justification of sinners, it is also recognized (certainly when used in times of distress) as an appeal to the power of the Savior to protect, secure and defend. "The sign of the cross means the imparting of blessing in the name of the Christ, but the accompanying words (spoken by the one mediating the blessing) show that blessing is seen as *life power*, as the presence and protection of the divine Lord."⁵

Accepting this commitment carries with it practical consequences which include the responsibility to create and participate in intentional rituals of blessing.

There is a part of me that grieves the loss of this powerfully symbolic action in our tradition. Although I am not suggesting the adoption of this practice, I am advocating that we intentionally seek out ways and means to accomplish what this custom intends to communicate: "life power," and the continuing presence and protection of the Lord.

While the simple words "God bless you!" could carry a similar message, I confess that at times I have cringed upon hearing those words expressed by well-meaning well-wishers, rolled off a tongue as nonchalantly as "Have a nice day!"

God—Bless—You.

Would not these words be more appropriately delivered in hushed and reverent tones? In a manner that acknowledges that the speaker knows full well that he is invoking the presence of the Creator of the universe? Would not the intent be enlivened and duly venerated if these words were embedded within a theological commitment that recognizes the awesome nature of our task of mediating the blessings of God, of incarnating his good pleasure in order to defy the "societal forces, cultural directions and social institutions

that contradict the purposes of God”⁶ Accepting this commitment carries with it practical consequences, which includes the responsibility to create and participate in intentional rituals of blessing.

By “rituals of blessing” I mean occasions in which words and actions are united to help us intentionally invoke “the presence and protection of the divine Lord” in ways that acknowledge the graceful mystery that envelopes God’s profound love for us. Simply conceived “blessing is an age-old way of committing someone to God’s love and care.”⁷ Thoughtfully explored blessing can have transcendent implications.

Consider the baby blessing shower I described at the beginning of this article. The gifts brought by generous guests were opened with delight and received with gratitude, and the fellowship was rich, full of laughter and joy. However, there was no doubt that the most meaningful, treasured aspect of this gathering was when baby Ryan was passed from the arms of one woman to the next, and words such as these were spoken:

Ryan, if you walk in the midst of trouble, God preserve you, stretch out his hand and deliver you. For the Lord will fulfill his purpose for you. His steadfast love endures forever.

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. Ryan, in this violent, unsettled world, may you sow seeds of peace everywhere you go.

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, “This is the way . . . walk in it.” Ryan, may you always listen closely to God’s voice directing your steps.

We call them blessing showers, because that is what they are. And they are undeniably sacred occasions. All of us present, the mother of the child and those of us there to offer blessings, are keenly aware that we are gathered on holy ground. As a mother who has watched her own infants cradled and kissed by beloved sisters in Christ and heard them speak such powerful words over them on their behalf, I can truly say that those words had power, and continue to have power.

These occasions feel sacramental in nature as we, members of the body of Christ, move beyond “our desire to be fed and act out our certain knowledge that we (too). . . are called to take, bless, break and give the stuff of our own lives.”⁸ I have no doubt that the words spoken over my children will make a difference in their lives. They are prophetic words, performative words, uttered in full confidence that the God who spoke the world into existence will act to accomplish them in the lives of these children dedicated to him.

The blessing of children at the East County Church of Christ in Gresham, Oregon, begins at birth but continues through their lives. When they begin school, we bless them. We bless their ongoing journey of faith when we give them Bibles in third grade. Our 4th, 5th, and 6th graders are blessed with words of affirmation before they participate in our local Bible Olympics competition. Baptisms are followed by a time for personal blessings, offered by individuals in the congregation. And we bless our graduates. Blessing is an expression of how important our children are to us, it is a time when we publicly call upon God to protect, secure and defend them from the materialism, individualism and violence so rampant in the world. We imagine the best for our children’s lives and commit ourselves to being part of fulfilling those blessings.⁹

But blessing is not for children alone.

All members of God’s spiritual kingdom are invited to live in the fullness of God’s blessing, and it is crucial for all of us to be explicitly reminded of God’s sustaining presence in our lives. To this end it can be helpful to seek out

“the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary. As we are called to participate in God’s own imagination—we see ourselves, our neighbors, and our world through God’s eyes, we see a world full of possibility, full of promise, ready to be transformed.”¹⁰

In our effort at East County to fulfill our vocation of transformation and sustain our ability to reflect and mediate God's love, we look for opportunities within the context of the life of the whole faith community to affirm our partnership in the redemptive work of God in the world and to ask for his continued grace and strength.

The vulnerability of people during life transitions and crisis are especially fertile episodes in which to be shaped by blessing. The celebration and blessing of marriage is an explicit example of this. The power of blessing provides context, Christian community, and the covenant nature of God, which makes promises secure by virtue of God's own promises. And so at East County, when a couple is engaged, that covenant commitment is affirmed by blessing.

This past Easter, Noland and Jennifer were married. Prior to the wedding ceremony they received a "blessing shower" and had words such as these spoken over them:

Noland and Jennifer, may the joy of the Lord be your strength.

Lord, may kindness and truth never leave Noland and Jennifer. May they bind them around their necks and write them on their hearts.

May you both do good, be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for yourselves treasure in heaven.

These promises are then reaffirmed and celebrated by the congregation when we honor and bless couples on their 25th and 50th wedding anniversaries.

One final example: At the close of each service at East County, two elders stand to bestow on the congregation a blessing and a charge. The blessing is spoken in the name of the Lord and intended to identify some aspect of the spiritual gifting given to us to accomplish God's good purposes. The charge serves as a bridge between what we have experienced in worship and our continuing participation in the work of God during the week. It is our belief that as we better appreciate the life of blessing into which we have been invited, we are better equipped to "be" a blessing in the world.

The examples above concern the daily life and labor of members of the East County Church of Christ. Because they have become traditions for us, they are truly expressive of our story, of our covenant commitments to the Lord and to one another. But our story is part of bigger story. It is a story that begins and ends with God.

A God who invites us to participate in that story by incarnating the kingdom of God through the receiving and giving of blessing. Why? That his way may be known upon earth, his saving power among all nations. Let the people praise him, our God, let all the people praise him. May God continue to bless us. Let all the ends of the earth revere him.

SHELLEY G. NEILSON

Mrs. Neilson is Children's Minister at the Highland Church of Christ, Abilene, Texas. She began that position in early August after 22 years at the East County Church of Christ, where she served as children's minister for the past eight years.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 498.
- 2 Brueggemann, 149.
- 3 Brueggemann, 529.
- 4 Brueggemann, 534.
- 5 Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 25.

- 6 Marva J. Dawn, *Is it a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 25.
- 7 John H. Westerhoff III, and William H. Willimon, *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* (Akron: Order of St. Luke Publications, 1994), 124.
- 8 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 73.
- 9 Gary Smalley and John Trent in their book *The Blessing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), do identify these elements as being common in a number of the blessing accounts in Genesis.
- 10 Taylor, 50.

OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories / Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
- Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *Models of Confirmation and Baptismal Affirmation: Liturgical and Educational Issues and Designs* (Religious Education Press, 1995).
- Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997).
- Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999).
- Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

