



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

February 24, 2019

Blessings
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Between Sunday morning sermons and meditations on occasions such as Christmas Eve, weddings, and funerals, I've spoken at roughly 500 different services over the last twelve and a half years at Westminster. Among other things, that means I'm unlikely to say much that's altogether new this morning. That's probably just as well because, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," and the minister's most basic task is to keep calling people back to Jesus.

I've always tried to do that, though we don't have altar calls in the Presbyterian Church as they do in some other traditions. That's not because we ministers are shy about inviting people to come to Jesus, but mainly, I think, for two other reasons. First, our strong sense of the sovereignty of God suggests that, if any of us ever come to Christ, it's because God's grace is already doing most of the work, and too much emphasis on our own decisions is likely to be misleading. The second reason is that we humans are notoriously fickle in our feelings and inconstant in our devotion, so conjuring a particular moment of decision matters far less in the long run than our constant need to let the Holy Spirit renew us day by day, our whole life long. Churches that focus on altar calls always have to worry about backsliding. We Presbyterians take backsliding for granted. We know we're going to do that, so we just have to trust God's grace to keep on making us new.

People my age, more or less, may remember a song from the late Sixties by a group called The Spiral Staircase:

I don't remember what day it was
I didn't notice what time it was
All I know is that I fell in love with you
And if all my dreams come true
I'll be spending time with you ...
I love you more today than yesterday
But not as much as tomorrow

Like most good love songs, this one works nearly as well for God as for anyone else we might fall in love with. That's how, by the way, an unblushingly romantic piece like the "Song of Solomon" finds its way into the Bible. The love we fall into with one another reflects the love our soul longs, deep down, to find in God.

All this is to say that the life of faith is largely a matter of finding blessings from the God who loves us and learning to share those blessings with other people. It's no coincidence that God tells Moses to bless the people of Israel in this way:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

All our blessings in life come first and foremost as gifts from God, and our perennial temptation is to focus so much on the gifts that we forget the Giver. We do this in part

because God's gifts are so good that we really do love them, and in part because forgetting that they were gifts in the first place feeds our sense of entitlement, as though we somehow deserved them and therefore have a right to hang onto them.

We need to be reminded constantly that we owe all of this goodness to God, the source of every good thing and the redeemer of every bad thing. A good blessing does just that: it reminds us, and so gives us the peace that comes with gratitude. "The Lord bless you and keep you"

It's also no coincidence that the most famous sermon of Jesus, what we call The Sermon on the Mount, begins with a litany of blessings:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Jesus says that things are not always as they seem. Those who appear to be losing now will turn out to be more blessed in retrospect than they realized, and those who use whatever power they have to take advantage of others, or do them wrong, will get their comeuppance in the end. God is just, and God is not mocked, and nobody gets away with doing bad things forever.

As Luke tells the story, Jesus does two things at the very end of the gospel.

First, he opens the minds of his followers to understand the scriptures. He tells them, this side of Easter, that all those awful things that happened to him did not escape God's plan for redemption. The Messiah had to suffer and die. That's true. But God raised him up on the third day. And why was that? In order to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all people.

Now, Jesus says, you who have seen these things need to go and tell everyone else, because people sorely need to come to repentance. Actions have consequences, and somebody always pays a price, so there's a burden of guilt that has to be taken away. And when people truly come to repentance, what they find in Christ is not condemnation but forgiveness, and God will make them a new creation, if they really want to be made new. You are my witnesses, Jesus says. Go and spread the word of how good God is.

The other thing Jesus does at the end of the gospel is lift up his hands and bless whoever happens to be standing around. That's the very last thing he does on this earth. As Luke describes the scene, "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." Think

about that. The last word from Jesus is a blessing. The bridge between earth and heaven is a blessing. “Blessed are you,” the Savior says. Whatever condition you’re in, whatever is going on in your life, Jesus will bless you, and the blessings you find here and now will point all the way to heaven.

Some of those blessings will be more obvious, in that they’ll consist of all the good things that come your way. Some will be less obvious. You may have to look for them in a certain poverty of spirit, or in the midst of mourning, or working for peace, or suffering from persecution or somebody else’s thoughtless slander. Either way, you will need the eyes of faith to recognize God’s blessings, lest you take the good things for granted and see only suffering in the bad. Just as Jesus had to open the minds of his followers to the scriptures, so he has to open the eyes of our hearts to see the very blessings he bestows upon us.

And then, of course, the only appropriate thing to do is to give thanks to God – “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” as the doxology says – and spread those blessings around. “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing,” St. Peter says. “It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” And he of all people should know what it is to be forgiven and blessed.

So there, in a sense, is the gospel in a nutshell: grace and gratitude, loving God because God first loved us, and loving other people as we love ourselves. It’s blessings all around.

And that seems like a good place to stop – to conclude a ministry, or more accurately, to pass the baton to the one who comes next. It's the same old story we tell here each week, yet somehow it's new every morning, like the mercies of God. And a peculiar thing about us humans is that, although we were made in the image of God, we always need to be reminded.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org