

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

6th Sunday of Easter
Year C

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Text: 1 Peter 3:8-10

Title: “Leading Causes of Life: Generations of Love—Blessing”

Most of us have people in our lives who have blessed us, people who give us a lift, people who build our confidence, treat us in ways that leave us feeling valued, important, gifted. One of those persons for me was my friend Dalton Bishop, the meaning of whose friendship I’ve shared with you over the years.

But there are others, too, who blessed my life. I think of my grandfather—my father’s father—who near the time of the Second World War decided with a friend of his they no longer wanted to be welders in someone else’s shop, so they quit and started their own shop. It was a daring move and a successful one for decades until Grandpa’s health struggles started. Yet, I was blessed—our family was blessed—by the courage he displayed in taking such a significant risk. He did well and it changed our family for the better.

Then there is my aunt Linda, my mother’s sister, who had a life-changing experience of Christ early in her life, so significant that she—the only one in our family that I’m aware of—left for Mexico as a missionary as a young woman. She was the one who gave me my first Bible in December of 1964. King James Version. I still have it. Her faith experience had an effect on my life. And so, she, too, blessed my life.

And there are lots of others. Teachers, pastors, friends and obviously close family members. People who along the way shared themselves in such a way as to give me life, grace-filled life, God-desired life. When I stop to really think of all the people who have contributed so much to who I am as a person, I find myself welling up with gratitude. I find myself thinking—maybe praying—the words of the Gospel According to John: “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” John 1: 16

When we consider what gives life, does being blessed have anything to do with it? What does it mean to be blessed anyway?

The biblical witness is filled with the blessings of God for God’s people. Think Abraham in the book of Genesis as he is called to leave his home in Haran and go where God directed. No GPS to guide him. No Google maps or Mapquest. Just go. But there’s a promise attached to the call:

“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”. Genesis 12:2

God tells Abraham to go and that in the going Abraham would be blessed by God, which presumably is a good thing. To receive God’s blessing is a positive experience, a life-giving experience. And so as Abraham and his entourage travelled in unknown territory, he found that in his complete dependence upon God for direction, guidance—in his openness to the ways of God—he was, in fact, blessed. His sons Isaac and Ishmael led to the promise God made as God shaped a relationship with Abraham. Through those two sons and the women who joined them, Abraham did become a great nation.

The thing about Abraham’s blessing was that it wasn’t to be kept to himself alone. No, a blessing is an openness to God and the gifts of God that are to be passed on and shared. Blessing is something to be received and shared.

And so one of Abraham’s grandsons, Jacob—one of Isaac’s boys—has his own encounter with God. The story goes that on his way back home to see his brother Esau for the first time since he swindled him out of his birthright, a strange man wrestled with him through the night. They both tried to overcome the other but neither could gain a decisive edge over the other. The man finally told Jacob to let him go but Jacob refused saying, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”²⁸ Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

It’s a rather strange story but again it’s a reflection of the power of blessing, the power of being open to and aware of God’s presence in living a blessed life. It was something Jacob was willing to die for if need be in order to receive it.

Fast forward to the New Testament to the letter of 1 Peter in which we read correspondence to a church listening for instruction about what it means to be Christ followers in their time. As they struggled with persecutions from outsiders and dissension in their own ranks the guidance provided them is made clear. In the letter’s words from the version called the Message:

⁸⁻¹² Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that’s your job, to bless. You’ll be a blessing and also get a blessing.

Whoever wants to embrace life
and see the day fill up with good,
Here’s what you do:
Say nothing evil or hurtful;
Snub evil and cultivate good;
God looks on all this with approval,
listening and responding well to what he’s asked;

But he turns his back
on those who do evil things.
1 Peter 3:8-12: The Message

“Bless—that’s your job! You’ll be a blessing and also get a blessing.” How many centuries before did God give the same instruction to Abraham? It’s the flow of God’s grace moving through history and the human beings who live it. Blessed to be a blessing, not to keep it to ourselves but to share what we have received.

At the recommendation of Wayne Muller’s book, Sabbath, Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest, which I’ve read a couple of times, I tried something I never intentionally practiced before. Muller says it’s his conviction that God created everything in goodness, that each creature God has called good as God created. Therefore, all life is blessed by God. Sometimes we forget that in the whirl of our preoccupied, task-oriented lives. In order to recognize the goodness present in people, Muller suggests blessing our children, our family members, our friends by placing a hand on their heads and offer a prayer for their well-being, their happiness, their healing. He also invites people to quietly and secretly bless strangers: “May you be happy. May you be at peace.”

So I experimented with this secret blessing. I went to a gas station in Oscoda to refill the propane tank for the grill. Walked in with the empty tank. A woman was at the till. A young gray-haired guy was standing near the counter, eating something. He looked at me, saw the tank and grunted. Walked out the door. I’d seen him filling a previous customer’s tank as I drove in so I assumed the grunt meant to follow him, which I did. He walked back to the small cement block shed where the tanks are filled. Without a word, smile or direct eye contact he took the tank, weighed it, hooked it up and began filling it. We both stood there, listening to the hissing of the pump as it filled the tank. I thought about initiating conversation, “Nice day. Been busy today?” that sort of thing, but decided instead to try Muller’s approach. So instead of talking, I secretly uttered a blessing: “May you be happy. May you be at peace.” I looked at him several times as the tank filled, but still no recognition on his part. I repeated the blessing. When the tank was full, he disconnected it, handed it to me and said, “Here you go!” I said thanks, followed him in and paid for it.

Jesus at one point in his ministry sent out 70 of his disciples two by two and gave them an instruction: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ [It was a way to offer a blessing.] And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.” (v.6) I’m fairly confident that the secret peace I offered came back to me with this gentlemen, but I found it fascinating that my inner experience with him in that shed was quite different than I’d experienced before. Instead of feeling the tension of whatever was going on with him to cause his rudeness, I found myself in the presence of God. An inner dialogue was going on as the blessing reminded me that in spite of his abruptness, this man was loved by God, that God was present in that shed in that moment. The kingdom of God was near whether he and I recognized it or not. And so the blessing in that moment came because I was changed by that little exercise even if he wasn’t.

Blessed to be a blessing is one of the leading causes of life. Where you find someone who has been blessed and recognizes it, you will find someone who knows he/she has been given a gift, the kind of gift that is to be passed on. To know you are blessed is reflected in an attitude

of gratitude, the acknowledgment that in so many ways-- and sometimes in very particular ways--we are gifted by God, loved by God. And that is an experience of the Spirit that can never be hoarded or contained. It always—always--finds a way to be shared.

So this morning's question for your blossoms for the tree of life are actually two:

1. Through whom have you been blessed?
2. Who are you blessing by helping them live fully? In other words, in what ways are you blessed and how are you sharing that blessing.

I will close with a proverb. Again, this is the version known as The Message:

“The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller. The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped. Curses on those who drive a hard bargain! Blessings on all who play fair and square!” Proverbs 11: 24-26 (The Message)