

The Power of Blessing
Gen. 12-1-3, Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-16
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Last week we honored the 20th anniversary of 9-11 and Ken talked to us about forgiveness. This morning I want to follow that up by talking about the power of blessing. Friends, for 190 years, Farmville Baptist has been a blessing in this community and beyond. In addition to taking care of each other, you are active in ministry through a host of mission projects from Habitat to Humanity to FACES to Baptist Campus Ministry to Farmville cares. Through BGAV, you give generously to cooperative missions. Farmville, you are a blessing

Great power is released when we bless others, so I want us to look at the power of blessing very intentionally this morning. The earliest blessing that we see in Scripture occurs in the very first chapter of Genesis. After God created humankind in the very image of God, God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and be good stewards over it.” We often hear this as a command, but it is a blessing. The first thing I want us to notice about this blessing is that it is RELATIONAL. Author Tina Boesch notes that the blessing of Adam and Eve is the opening of a dialogue between God and humanity, and that blessing served to propel them forward as they began their lives together.¹ Blessings are an integral part of God’s purposes for the world. Blessings are prayers with feet on them, they carry us from the present moment into future grace.

The word blessing occurs 88 times in the book of Genesis, far more times than in any other book in the Hebrew bible. Perhaps the most famous place is in chapter 12, the call of Abram that we heard just a few minutes ago. In this passage, God appears suddenly and without introduction. The narrator of the story assumes that Abram knows the one who is speaking to him. It is also important to note that this blessing has some contingencies attached to it. Before Abram will receive the blessing of land and children and inheritance, he must leave. He must leave his country, his clan, and his home. And the kicker is he doesn’t know where he is supposed to go. It sounds crazy. At this point in the story, the destination is not the focus. It doesn’t matter WHERE Abram is going, but it matters that he is going WITH God. He is asked to let go of his current identity to find his true identity with God. God not only provides Abram with a new identity – including a new name, God provides Abraham and his family with a new community in the nation of Israel.

But this blessing, as powerful as it is, is not just for Abraham’s sake, or even Israel’s – it is for the sake of all humankind. “I will bless you,” God said, “so that you may be a blessing.” You see, blessing is a gift from God that flows through us as humans – and it involves every sphere of our existence from the spiritual to the tangible. God blesses us not just for our own sake, but so that we may convey God’s blessing to others.

We lose sight of that sometimes, don't we? The disciples did. Like Abraham, they were called to leave everything - their families, their jobs, and their homes to follow Jesus. They were the ones being trained to bless the world with the gospel, but they struggled. In Mark chapter 9, in the gospel passage we heard earlier, they are arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. In that moment, Jesus draws a child to him and says, "whoever welcomes a child welcomes me, and the One who sent me." In the very next verses, they try to stop someone they don't know who is working in Jesus' name – they seem to want to block that source of blessing. In the next chapter, people are bringing little children to Jesus so that he might heal them, but the disciples speak sternly to them. This makes Jesus indignant, and he says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And Jesus takes the children up in his arms, lays his hands upon them, and blesses them.

We need to be careful that we don't romanticize this story. In Jesus' day, children were viewed differently than we view them today. Of course parents loved their children, but they had little or no status, some went as far as to consider them non-persons. It is to such as these – people that we would consider non-persons, that the kingdom belongs, it is such as these that Jesus blesses.

Pastor Mary Luti notes that when we bless someone we are saying, "I see you, you matter." She goes on to say, "nothing is more important than the routine affirmation that you are worth everything to somebody." But too many often don't get the blessing. Too often, like the disciples, we unintentionally or willfully withhold it.

Why is this? Sometimes it's because **we** don't feel like we are worthy of God's blessing. "How many times do we exhaust ourselves," Mary asks, "trying to earn what we already have? God's love for us, God's pleasure in us is original equipment – and nothing we can do can take that love away." A blessing then tells us the truth about who we truly are. And when we bless others, we begin to see others as they long to be seen – as people that God loves, no matter who they are or what they've done.

Last week we remembered the terrorist attacks of 9-11. On that awful day, a Navy chaplain was called to the makeshift morgue at the Pentagon. Most of the bodies brought in that day were unrecognizable. After a coroner formally pronounced someone dead and gave them an identifying tag - then the chaplain would bless them. As the chaplain went about this incredibly difficult ministry, it occurred to her that some of the bodies she was blessing were not Pentagon employees, but they were the bodies of the terrorists who had brought about the death and destruction that surrounded her. That day she said, she had to struggle like never before with the troubling graciousness of God, she had to struggle with a God who errs on the side of everyone. It's hard to do, isn't it – to bless our enemies, those we see as non-persons?

New York social worker Julio Diaz understands the importance of blessing those that we might not think to bless. Walking to his favorite diner for supper one night, he was robbed at

knife point by a teen-aged boy. The young man demanded Diaz's wallet, and Diaz passed it over without objection. But just as his mugger turned to walk away, Diaz called after him: "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something." The mugger turned around, surprised. "If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night," Diaz said, "you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The teenager looked at Diaz in disbelief, and asked why he would do such a thing. Diaz replied, "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money." He told the young man that he'd just been heading out for dinner, and that he would be happy for some company. "You know, I just felt maybe he really needed help," Diaz later told reporters.

The young mugger decided to take Diaz up on his offer, and they headed into Diaz's favorite local haunt together. As they were sitting at the table, the manager, the dishwashers, and the waiters all stopped over to say hello to Diaz, and the young man was amazed at his popularity. "You're even nice to the dishwasher," he exclaimed.

"Haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him.

"Yea, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the teenager replied.

When the bill came, Diaz told the teen that he'd have to get the check. After all, he still had Diaz's wallet. But the teenager slid the wallet back across the table without a moment's thought, and Diaz treated him to dinner. Diaz also gave the would-be mugger a \$20 bill to take with him, in exchange for the young man's knife.¹ This blessing told the truth about who this young man was. The blessing helped him to see himself as God sees him, and as he longed to be seen. (PAUSE)

This morning, you have come home, to this family of faith, a place where I hope you feel loved, and honored and blessed. For the next few moments, I want you to reflect on good words that have blessed you. What were those words and who spoke those truths into your life? Imagine what your life might be like if you couldn't remember a single one. (Pause) Now, think about how you would feel to hear every day that you mean everything to someone. To God, and to God's people. Finally, God wants to continue to bless the world through you – as individuals and as a congregation. Who do you know today that needs a blessing? Who needs to be a part of this family of faith and how might God be calling you to be the avenue of blessing for them?

As God lays someone on your heart, I pray that like Abraham and like the disciples, you'll be willing to leave the safety of this place and follow God's call.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/06/man-buys-dinner-for-his-m_n_95178.html, accessed February 7, 2011.

Benediction for these times:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with a holy anger toward injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

ⁱ Tina Boesch, *Given*, p. 7.