

July 22, 2018

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Blessed By Blessings”

I stood at the back of the church sanctuary that Sunday morning next to the Senior Pastor of the congregation. I was in my first year of seminary training and working with that pastor and congregation to gain some ministry experience. It was my job that particular Sunday to help lead in worship and I was prepared. I'd been given the scripture reading well in advance and I'd practiced it to be sure there weren't any weird bible words that would throw me off. Added to this were a few other assisting duties, nothing too tough, and I stood confidently at the back with the pastor as the organ played, signaling the beginning of the service. As we took our first step down the aisle the pastor stopped, turned to me, and quietly said, “Oh, forgot to tell you. You're doing the Pastoral Prayer this morning. It comes at the usual place. Be ready.” It was as if time suddenly stood still. “What?” I wanted to respond. “The Pastoral Prayer? You didn't say anything about a prayer. I don't have a prayer ready. You can't expect me to just stand up and pull that off.” Well, that's what I wanted to say but there was no time. We were walking forward. The service had started. If it's possible to get stage fright in worship I was very near to it. My heart was pounding. My breath was shallow. My mind was racing. How would I be able to just stand up and lead prayer with no warning? Somehow, I did. Somehow, I stood up and said something that day. I'm sure my nerves were very evident to the congregation but we all got through it. Then and now, prayer is important business. We don't take it lightly. None of us want to make a mess of it.

Maybe you've agonized over prayer sometime in your life. Maybe there was a time when you were asked to pray out loud in public and didn't think you could do it. There are also the times when we don't even know what to pray. What should we ask of God? We don't want to get that wrong. We don't want to ask for something that could push everything down the wrong path. Our prayers are often wrapped around a troublesome problem in our lives. Because of this we want a solid strategy when we get God involved. Prayer is an important problem solving tool and we want to get it right. The pressure of this can sometimes paralyze our prayer life. What we are saying is that our greatest anxiety isn't the worry we'll be asked to pray in public. For most of us that's not likely happen. The greater issue is to know what to say in our quiet and personal conversations with God. How do we best tell God what we need, what we want, what must happen so that the daily burden we carry is made lighter?

When we hear the opening verses of the Book of Ephesians prayer may not come immediately to mind. Yet, deeper reflection makes the connection. The words are speaking to our anxiety and worry. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing...” (Eph. 1:3) The passage is filled with the certainty of what God can do. Why do we worry? The message is, we are blessed in Christ. If prayer is our effort to get God to act in some specific way the bible wants us to know God has already acted. God doesn't wait for us. God's not holding back until we get the words of our prayer just right. We are already blessed. Now, to be blessed by God is not some generic, feel-good platitude. The apostle, Paul, lays it out for us. We are chosen in Christ. We are named as God's children. We are redeemed by Christ's death and resurrection on the cross. We are forgiven. We receive an inheritance that connects us to God's purpose and the result of this is a life that is made more hopeful, more confident, and more filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer shouldn't be about us trying to get it right or setting up some kind of strategy for God so that things will turn out OK. The bible says God already has given incredible gifts. Whether we're praying in the midst of trouble or just trying to live our lives the best way we can, we begin knowing we are already those who are richly blessed in the Lord. We are blessed by so many blessings, says the apostle. It's hard for Paul to imagine why we would ever be tentative in our faith. God acts in our lives because of Christ. Our task is to celebrate what God has done. Our response is to trust what God makes possible, and live as those already blessed and loved. Every solution to our need and every want for which we pray flows from the blessing that is already ours.

When we take to heart what the bible is saying our eyes open to all God has done. We are blessed by blessing and this leads to our being less anxious, less troubled and more able to experience joy and peace. I've been reflecting on a book I read years ago. The book is by Eugene O'Kelly and it's entitled, Chasing Daylight. Eugene O'Kelly was the CEO of one of the world's largest accounting firms. He was quite wealthy and important, at least in terms of the way the world decides these things. He writes the book shortly after receiving the devastating news that he's been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. He has just months to live. By the way, the subtitle of O'Kelly's book is, How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life. The author writes about his discovery of what really matters in life. He connects with those he loves. He discovers a spiritual presence in everything that he was blind to when all he could think about was work and acquiring more. He stops fretting about things that have no ultimate meaning. In the process, he discovers a presence of God that is so rich in its capacity to bless him he faces his illness

with grace and hope. Eugene O'Kelly discovered how every moment is so full of God there is no reason to be pulled down and buried in a mountain of worry. The worst news any of us can imagine becomes the catalyst for Eugene O'Kelly to discover what was always true for him. He was blessed by God with every spiritual blessing. This is true for us, too.

The message today isn't that we have to be given a terminal diagnosis to discover what life is all about. Let's be clear. It's not wrong to work hard and to accomplish much, and it's not a mistake to achieve and succeed in life. What is a problem is to fail to recognize that God has already blessed us beyond anything we can ever imagine. We don't have to die to figure out how to live. We're all trying to discern some kind of plan for the path of our lives. What we know today is that God's got a plan too. In fact, God has already put this plan into full gear. We are already included in God's family. We are already forgiven and saved by love. We are already solidly a part of God's purpose, and that purpose is to extend goodness and peace into the world. Why do we work so hard to get God to do something. This is a lot of wasted anxiety and effort on our part. God's already done it. We are blessed by so much blessing in Christ.

And so, as this message moves to a close, what is our next step? One Christian teacher I consult often talks about how we tend to separate our spiritual life from the rest of life. In other words, we focus on God when we're here and we think about God in this hour but through the rest of the week our hearts and minds go to other places. The goal is to bring it together. The task we are given is to connect the blessing of God to all aspects of our lives. Let's work on that this week. When we're with our families, with our spouse, with those we love instead of moving so quickly to criticism and disappointment let's begin with the blessing. What a blessing God has given us that we are not alone in this life. What a gift to be loved. Our prayer for our families can be less that God would make them be something or do something and more a prayer of thanksgiving that we share life together. When it comes to our work, instead of focusing on how what we do isn't everything it should be let's pray to God words of gratitude that we are given abilities that give us a reason to get out of bed each day. Connect the blessing of God with all aspects of life. Look for the ways in which God's blessing is evident. If we start each day focusing on what we already have than what we don't have may not be so important anymore.

Paul would say, "It's so evident what God has done." We are blessed in Christ. We are made to be children of God. We are given grace. There is not one day when this is not true. Take hold of God's blessing today and find peace.