

The Power to Bless

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Texts: Numbers 6:22-27 and Philippians 4: 4-9

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I've been thinking this week about the tangled business of blessing.

Last summer, some of you may recall, we studied the story of Esau and Jacob, of one brother who cheated out of his father's blessing the other brother. What an awful business that was.

Today in Numbers we hear perhaps the most beautiful blessing in all the Bible, given by the Lord to Moses and Aaron, not all that long after the Lord had just about given up on that stiff-necked crowd in the wilderness and had to be restrained from zapping them into oblivion by Moses' intercession. And here he blesses them.

And in Philippians we find a blessing embedded in some of the richest teachings of the whole New Testament by a follower of Jesus who encourages his hearers to be gentle, to rejoice in all things, and not to worry, in spite of the fact that at that very moment he is sitting in prison in Rome, awaiting judgement, and (we now know) his execution. And still he has time to bless us.

Blessings matter so much because blessings are so needed. Life creates needs only blessings will satisfy. And we have the power to bless.

This week many of you watched the Public Television Series "Country Music" by Ken Burns. In one episode we hear the story of singer-song-writer Kris Kristofferson. Born into a military family in Texas, his father a General in the Air Force, Kris graduated Phi Beta Kappa from a distinguished Liberal Arts College in California, was a Rhodes Scholar studying English literature at Oxford University, an Army Ranger helicopter pilot, selected to teach at West Point. Quite a pedigree. But after he visited Nashville, he made the fateful decision to become a song-writer instead. In the show, quoting a passage about what it means to follow your calling and what it costs not to, from his favorite poet William Blake, Kris explains that he suddenly knew when he visited Nashville what he had been created for, to touch the hearts of other people through songs.

Because of his decision, his wife left him, taking their small son with her. His parents disowned him. Rather than receiving a blessing from his mother, she wrote him a letter which ended by saying, Don't write us back and never try to visit us. When he showed Johnny Cash the letter, Cash said, "It's always nice to hear from the folks back home, isn't it?"

Cash knew about being denied the blessing. When his older brother, Jack, died as a kid, Cash's father said to him, "I wish you had died instead of Jack."

Our lives cry out for blessing.

Many years ago, Professor Myron Madden wrote a great little book titled, *The Power to Bless*. I think that title conveys almost everything we need to know because this is what we have at our fingertips everyday, the power to bless.

Dr. Madden had his hand on the pulse of broken people whom he had known close-up and personally as a psychotherapist. He understood how much power lies in a blessing, what a difference it can make in a life. He also understood that there's such a thing as a cheap blessing, which, like cheap grace, means nothing. A cheap blessing is like a pat on the head, it's demeaning, really, patronizing. "Now there's a good boy." "Now there's a good girl."

A cheap blessing, like cheap grace heals nothing, because it costs nothing. What we need is blessing that wells up from a heart of love, a heart of overflowing love, a heart that knows just what is required in a real blessing.

The story is told about a man to whom Pope Francis was explaining God's mercy and God's love for each of us.

The man said, "Oh, Father, if you knew my life you wouldn't talk to me like that! I have done some terrible things!"

Here's what Francis said, "Even better! Go to Jesus. He likes to hear about these things. He forgets, he has a special knack for forgetting. He forgets, he kisses you, he embraces you, and he says, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.' If things haven't changed in a month... go back to the Lord. The Lord never tires of forgiving.

How different from that sad story of Esau. After his brother, Jacob, fools his father into giving him the blessing he had intended for Esau, and after Jacob slinks off into the night bathed in his father's grace, poor Esau enters his father's tent and receives the terrible news that his father has given away the blessing intended for him. Those words spoken can't be rescinded.

Do you remember what Esau says, "Father, have you no blessing left for me?"

In biblical scholarship, we speak of the progressive nature of God's revelation. In fact, it is more accurate to say that we as human beings become progressively better at understanding God's revelation of himself. God is the same from all eternity, but it took a long time, it took centuries, for our ancestors in the faith to figure out that God has the infinite capacity to bless, and not only the infinite capacity; God himself is the blessing, and he has given himself entirely to us in Jesus.

"Father, Lord, God, have you no blessing left for me?"

Yes, is the answer. Yes!

This is what God says through Moses and Aaron to a people that flirted with idolatry and that outright distrusted God again and again even after God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt, accomplishing the most amazing wonders of liberation. God says to this people who had doubted and disobeyed him: "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.”

In this moment of supreme benediction, the Lord reminds the men and women and children following Moses that long before God first called them into being through their parents Abraham and Sarah, he blessed them so that they might bless all the nations of all the earth. “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.*”

Several years ago, Austin Seminary hosted a luncheon to honor a former chair of the board of trustees. Ed was something else. He was a leading expert in maritime law, the founder of banks, and he told the most awful, dumb jokes you can imagine at august gatherings of our seminary constituencies. It was impossible not to love him; he just brimmed over with good humor. And he possessed a profound sense of gratitude for all the good things he had been given in life.

At the luncheon honoring Ed, his daughter, Ann, related something that had happened that very morning on their way from Houston to Austin.

She was driving him. Apparently, the two of them were so busy chatting, that they failed to check the gas gauge. A little over half-way to Austin, the car began to chug to a halt. Ann maneuvered it safely off the interstate highway onto the shoulder and she called for help. Within a few minutes a young man from the nearest service station pulled up behind them in his pickup. He put some gas in the car, and led them to the next town where they could fill up the tank.

After the young man filled the tank and Ann paid for the gas, her father motioned to her to come over to his window. He rolled it down. He had taken two crisp fifty dollar bills from his wallet, and said, “Here, give that boy this to thank him.”

Ann said, “Daddy, I think he would be happy with one of those.”

To which Ed responded. “I don’t want him to be happy, darlin’. I want him to be ecstatic.”

True story. And a wonderful story about a man who knew himself blessed and who wanted to bless others. But you know the part of that story that gets me? His daughter told it.

I remember hearing her tell that story, and as we all laughed and nodded our heads recognizing Ed’s trademark generosity in her words, I said to myself: “That’s the kind of story I want my children and grandchildren to be able to tell about me.”

“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.”

Amen.