

Borrowed Blessings

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Matthew 5: 1-10

Numbers 6:22-27

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I've got a beef with Aaron. It probably dates from the first time I saw Cecil B. DeMille's movie "The Ten Commandments." And I'm not alone. Others have had trouble seeing why Aaron should be the one granted the great privilege of serving as High Priest blessing the people of Israel with the most beautiful benediction ever written, considering what he had done.

Even Elie Wiesel, the prophetic conscience of the twentieth century, in his essay, "Aaron and His Problem of Innocence," confesses: "I do not understand Aaron, nor do I understand the attitude our tradition has shown toward him. Why does it pay him homage alongside his younger brother [Moses]...?"

Many commentators and scholars and sages have questioned why Aaron's name should forever be linked to the name of Moses. Aaron doesn't just tag along with Moses. Aaron actually becomes a liability to Moses, and worse. Aaron just doesn't deserve to be named in the same breath as Moses, let alone be placed in the position of the spiritual leader of his people, and, therefore given the privilege to speak the greatest benediction ever recorded.

Aaron's idolatry, following fast upon the heels of God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian bondage, is the thing that disturbs me most. Maybe the theatrics of Cecil B. DeMille, with scantily clothed starlets cavorting with a calf of gold, were a little over the top, maybe not.

But it seems as though Moses had just left his people alone for a few minutes, when a sort of mob mentality took control, and rather than fulfilling the uncomfortable role of spiritual leader to his people, rather than being in that moment the voice of conscience, the steady, measured, reasoned voice of constraint that would save the people from their basest reactions, Aaron immediately joined the mob, and actually led them into the vile superstition of idolatry.

Their idolatry is only symbolized by making a calf of gold and dancing around praising the dumb ox for deliverance. The heart of their idolatry, as is always the case, consisted in regarding as God that which is not God, raising a relative value to the position of absolute value, mistaking their own echoing voices for the voice of God.

Superstition may attribute to an object the magical power to do what we wish. But idolatry goes much further than superstition. Superstition is to idolatry, what a head cold is to a cancerous malignancy.

To draw on a historical example, and the one that influenced our own Presbyterian tradition most, we might remember the confession of faith called The Barmen Declaration. It reminds us that superstition places a sort of magical value on certain symbols of a nation, such as the Nazi preoccupation with their Swastika.

They waved their Swastika flags, hung them from every conceivable pole and building, and wore them on their clothes, and put them on their cars. Everything they could think of seemed to get branded by the Swastika. They invested their national symbol with a kind of magical, mystical power. While detestable, and bizarre, such superstition may not in itself be spiritually deadly.

Idolatry, however, in distinction from mere superstition, gave total power and demanded absolute obedience to a human leader who assumed lordship over the conscience and control over every aspect of human society. The private faith of individuals was cooped right along with the ecclesiastical powers. This is why some courageous Reformed and Lutheran leaders in 1934 protested against Nazism and Hitler: "There is one Lord whom we must trust and must obey in life and in death," and that one lord, we are told, was most certainly not Adolf Hitler. There are no parts of life over which the Lord God is not Lord.

Maybe this is why Elie Wiesel is so disappointed in Aaron. At that moment when the mob threatened, rather than speaking the word that would hold them back from their worst excesses, he just went along with them. He actually helped the mob turn from the Lord God to the old false gods. He was the captain who abandons his ship.

In the moment of his greatest test, when Aaron was challenged by history to find his deep core of conscience and hold fast, he faltered and failed. And when he did, the people rushed to their destruction. Moses, as always, stood alone and apart, like a rock, risking his life and reputation to save the people from themselves, while Aaron just goes with the flow.

And, yet. And. Yet. Here we are, in Numbers, chapter six, once again. And the Lord God speaks to Moses and says, Moses give Aaron this benediction from the lips of God to speak to bless his people forevermore.

As I said, I've got a beef with Aaron. Aaron doesn't deserve to speak God's blessing. Aaron doesn't deserve the privilege. At the critical moment, Aaron didn't earn the right.

But maybe, maybe, my beef isn't with Aaron at all.

Maybe my beef is with God, the one who blessed Aaron, the failed spiritual leader, the whisky priest, the prophet for hire. Maybe my beef is with the God who placed on his lips the greatest blessing ever.

Again, it is Elie Wiesel who says what I'm thinking, and says it so much better than I ever could. And he says it by asking a question open-ended enough for us all to enter into it: "*How*

could a leader who followed rather than led, a man who has betrayed his calling, how can he remain the spiritual guide of an entire community, as if nothing happened?"

Of course, we know the answer don't we. *"God is gracious and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love."* Even the High Priest commissioned by God to keep his people from committing the first great commandment, "Thou shalt have no other God's before me," even he is subject to grace upon grace upon grace.

The God of ancient Hebrew scripture is not a different God from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not a cruel, sadistic God of hatred and division and retribution. We were a people of tribal fears and tribal hatreds, and we wrote texts to prove God is just as bad as we are at our worst. But God, the Lord God, keeps contradicting us, and calling us beyond our history toward his vision for us.

God keeps reminding us that his covenant is not a contract that can be broken, and he is not a crooked judge who can be bribed. He keeps his promises, not only with our most distant ancestors of faith, but with us, right now. As Deuteronomy says: *"The Lord made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us alive today. The Lord talked with you face to face on the mountain out of the midst of the fire."*

Moses was with God on the mountaintop while Aaron was down below with the people worshipping a false god. This is the geographical fact, the fact in space and time. But this is not the spiritual reality. In the heart of God, his vacillating priest and his idolatrous people were up in the mountain beside Moses, talking with God face to face.

This is grace, not retrospective but contemporaneous, not shrouded in the distant mists of our guilt, but shining under the present glare of God's mercy. And because God's mercy is what it is, because God blesses sinners, even that guilty priest, even he, even Aaron, gets to bless his people. But that's not all.

Barbara Brown Taylor once reflected on the peculiar nature of the priest's role. She spent several years as an Episcopal priest, as she described herself, as a professional blesser.

Barbara observed the irony of the fact that you can't sneeze in a line at the Post Office without half a dozen people blessing you, but those same people would not feel very comfortable pronouncing a blessing in almost any other circumstance.

Why?

Some say they aren't qualified. Others say they are undeserving. Some say they aren't that religious. Others that they'd just feel silly.

Barbara says that some folks "would rather jump off the high diving board than try to say something holy in front of a bunch of people. My guess," she continues, "is that even if you asked them to bless something in private — thereby separating the fear of public speaking

from the fear of pronouncing a blessing — they would still demur. If you are one of those people, then only you know why. All I can tell you is how much the world needs you to reconsider.”

This broken world needs the blessings even if spoken by broken people.

I suspect that old Aaron carried with him the scars of his failure all through his life. Little brother Moses was brave and brazen. Aaron timid and untrustworthy. And maybe that is precisely why the Lord God said to Moses: *“I am going to hand on to you the blessing that I want my people to receive. I want them to receive it from Aaron and his sons. I believe that he will accept this blessing from your hands, Moses, as though he is borrowing your courage along with my blessing.”* Maybe that’s the way it went.

Aaron failed, at a critical moment. Sometimes we do. But if God were waiting for something other than sinners to pronounce his blessing, he’d be waiting forever. There’s not one of us who deserves God’s blessings, nor the privilege to bless others, but today he has shared with us, *even us*, all of us now here, the privilege to bless others.

Amen.