

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH
The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings: Benediction

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 103

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

*The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those
who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*

*As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember
to do his commandments.*

*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.
Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.
Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will.
Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.*

***“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless [God's] holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all [God's] benefits...”***

Psalm 103:1-2

Barbara Brown Taylor begins her chapter on THE PRACTICE OF PRONOUNCING BLESSINGS
this way:

As someone who has been paid to pronounce blessings at weddings and funerals, at baptisms and house blessings, at soup kitchens and foxhunts – as well as at lots of weekly worship services – I think it is a big mistake to perpetuate the illusion that only certain people can bless things. Not everyone is vulnerable to this illusion, I know. Plenty of people say grace over meals in their own homes, asking God to bless the food they are about to receive from the divine bounty. A number more bless their children at bedtime, asking God to bring those children safely through the night. Where I live, you can sneeze in line at the post office and receive half a dozen blessings from people you do not even know.

Yet there remain a great many people who excuse themselves when asked to pronounce a formal blessing. They are not qualified, they say. They are not good with words. They would rather jump off a high diving board than try to say something holy in front of a bunch of other people. My guess 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.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 193-194)

Just like all of the other spiritual practices Barbara Brown Taylor has named in her book *AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH*, the best way to find out how practices work is to do actually do them, to give them a try. This is true for pronouncing blessings too. The best way to learn about them and their power is to go ahead and pronounce a few, letting the practice itself “teach what you what you need to know.” And when it comes to this practice in particular, Taylor says “the key to blessing things is knowing that they have already beat you to it. The key to blessing things is to receive their blessing.”

Jewish tradition is rich in blessing. All kinds of kinds of things and situations call forth the speaking of blessing. From sunrise to sunset, each day is full of opportunities to express words of blessings, to let your heart sing. So important is this practice of pronouncing blessing that the Jewish Talmud declares: “It is forbidden to taste of the pleasures of this world without a blessing.”

Our Christian tradition, which is so rooted in the Jewish faith, has inherited this practice of pronouncing blessings. We bless water, bread, wine, oil, babies, the sick. We bless marriages (both straight and gay) as well as those who have died and those who grieve the passing of loved ones. Our protestant heritage may be a little more humble and little less in-your-face about pronouncing blessings than our Roman Catholic and Episcopalian sisters and brothers, but we still do it.

If you read Taylor’s chapter, you know she talks at length about her joy in participating in the blessings of homes. And she particularly gets a kick out of the portion of the blessing of a home that is said in the bathroom of all places.

Well, in one of my more “stranger” moments of pastoral ministry here at Cross Creek, I was called on to bless a bathroom home. In other words, I was called upon to bless what is we call an “outhouse.” Yes, Mark and Patty Thompson invited me to officiate at the blessing of their outhouse. If you have ever been to Mark and Patty’s house for the Fall Festival, or for any other reason, you know that they have a deluxe outhouse. If *Midwest Living Magazine* were to ever do a feature article on “outhouses of note” across the Midwest, I am sure Mark and Patty’s out house would be worthy of their coverage.

On the appointed night of this particular blessing, Mark and Patty gathered their Christian community by their outhouse, which was draped with a ribbon of toilet paper for the ribbon cutting portion of the service. For days I wracked my brain thinking of words that would be appropriate for such a bizarre and sacred occasion. And in my quest to craft the liturgy for this blessing, I stumbled upon a service for the blessing of house in the *United Methodist Book of Worship*, which by the way, is full of services of blessings of all kinds (another reminder that Christian tradition is rife with the practice of blessing!). The service began with these words...“Jesus said, “Behold, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.” Of course, with the context of an outhouse blessing in mind, all I could imagine was Jesus standing outside the outhouse door, needing to relieve himself.

And when it came time to actually do the blessing of the outhouse, those words, and the imaginings they engendered, so tickled me that I could barely continue with the blessing. But it was those words, “Behold, I am standing at the door, knocking” that began the service of blessing

of the outhouse. And from those words we proceeded on with laughter and prayer and cut the ribbon of toilet paper. And before the night was over, we all had the opportunity to christen the outhouse with the blessing of our bodily digestive systems working beautifully and wonderfully, thanks be to God!

After it was all said and done, I rejoiced to have been a part of that odd and fun night ...of the peculiar opportunity of being together in Christian community. And since then, there have been a number of occasions when the people who were present on that night have remembered it with delight as a sign and symbol of the quirkiness of this church we love.

But I have to be honest, I have often wondered if my participation in that outhouse blessing may have demeaned and diminished the sacred purpose to which I have been called as an ordained minister. I have wondered what my clergy colleagues would think if they ever found out that I officiated at such a blessing. And while I enjoyed being a part of that peculiar moment, I always felt my delight was laced with a tinge of deviance and a pinch the holy mixed with the profane. But reading Barbara Brown Taylor's chapter on the practice of pronouncing blessings has put the blessing of the outhouse, and all future blessings whatever and wherever they may be, in new perspective. If for no other reason, such blessings are worth doing because they serve to remind all of us that holiness is not reserved for the church house...that the sacred, the Holy Mystery of Life is just as much a part of the ordinary and the mundane and the everyday.

The words of Psalm 103 are full of blessing and thanksgiving. And they remind us that the practice of blessing is not without its benefits:

"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Psalm 103:1-5)

The practice of pronouncing blessing has its advantages. The practice of pronouncing blessing not only promotes the well-being of others and the world, but it also promotes our own well-being as well. Forgiveness, healing, redemption, love and goodness are just a few of the benefits of a life of blessing, and that is just getting started.

In addition, the practice of pronouncing blessing is laced with the Wisdom gleaned and accumulated from seasoned experience from those who have practiced doing it. First, a blessing does not convey holiness. It simply acknowledges the holiness that is *already* there. As Taylor notes

The holiness is already there, embedded in the very givenness of the thing. The mosquito does not need your help to make it holy. The heavy boy at the airport does not need you to place him divine custody... Because God made these beings, they share in God's own holiness, whether or not they meet y our minimum requirements for a blessing.

This idea begs debate, especially in a culture sold on cosmetic surgery, home improvement, physical fitness, and the Protestant work ethic. Surely it makes more sense to withhold a blessing until something has become the best it can be? Surely there are some things that are so repulsive, worthless, or destructive that blessing them would be like aiding the opposition? The only way to find out is to try. Practice blessing something simply because it exists alongside you and find out what your mind does with that exercise. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 203)

Second, the practice of pronouncing blessings requires us to blur our lines between what is bad and what is good for us. Wisdom tells us that we are not always smart enough to tell the difference. Or as Taylor says:

You say a blessing when you break a bone the same as you do when you win the lottery. The two events may be more alike than you know. Live with either of them very long and you may discover that neither of them is as bad or as good as you first thought it would be. The blessing covers your ignorance and seeds your curiosity all at the same time.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 204-205)

Finally, the practice of pronouncing blessings puts us as close to God as we can get:

To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love – this is to land at God's breast.

To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective. To pronounce a blessing is to participate in God's own initiative. To pronounce a blessing is to share God's own audacity. This may be why blessing prayers make some people uncomfortable. As a loyal churchwoman once said in my hearing, "I don't want to be that important." Yet she relied on me, her priest, to say the blessings she was unwilling to say herself – because she knew they were necessary, because she needed to hear a human voice pronouncing God's blessing on her the same way she needed food and water, because otherwise she might give in to the insistent idea that she truly was not important, that both she and the whole world, including the people she loved, were without significant meaning.

She counted on me to raise my hands in the air on a regular basis and ask God to bless her. She belonged to a whole congregation that was willing to pay people like me so that we would not be otherwise engaged when they needed one of us to lay hands on a baby, or a sick person, or a loaf of bread, or one of them. They did not need anyone to tell them that blessings confer meaning. They could feel it when a blessing landed on them, like warm oil poured on their crowns of their heads...

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 206)

All I am saying is that anyone can do this. Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony, often tender, always life-giving hand above their heads. That we are able to bless one another at all is evidence that we have been blessed, whether we can remember when or not. That we are willing to bless one another is miracle enough to stagger the very stars.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 208-209)

It is Thanksgiving time, my friends. There is no finer time to practice pronouncing blessings than this particular holiday, which is my favorite, which seems odd. After all I am a Christian minister and the religious HOLY-days should really be the ones that count, like Christmas or Easter. But, I am stuck on Thanksgiving. And while Thanksgiving is a national holiday (as opposed to a religious holy-day), I can't help but feel its connection with that which is at the heart of what is holy and sacred. Or as Wisdom teaches us: "Pronouncing blessings puts you as close to God as we can get."

There is so much I want to bless today: my life and health; my vocation as a minister in Christ's Church, which is totally exhausting and abundantly fulfilling all at the same time; my beloved husband and partner in life; my two happy and ornery sons; the food and shelter and warmth we are blessed to have; the opportunity for my family to go to the mountains this week for a Thanksgiving holiday with my parents and my brother and his partner, my brother-in-love.

I also want to bless this church. To bless our life-giving friendships and community; to bless our new covenant members who enlarge our reach and our imagination; to bless our witness to justice and inclusion; to bless our willingness to feed hungry people and reach across racial lines; to bless our openness to an alternative, radical vision of the gospel of Jesus that is grounded in transforming Love for us, for friends as well as enemies, for the world; to bless our hospitality toward and welcome of church refugees and spiritual seekers of all kinds; to bless our worship that is both comforting and challenging; to bless our willingness to give both time and treasure to make this church with purr with vitality and strength; to bless all of you who are willing to be pronouncers of blessings as you journey on the way as disciples of Jesus.

I received one of those blessings this past Friday from another Barbara...not Barbara Brown Taylor...but our own Barbara Battin. We have a psalmist and a poet in our midst! I used her Thanksgiving blessing from last year as our opening prayer today. And then, on Friday, another blessing came from Barbara and I just couldn't wait until next year to share it with you...to extend the blessing she has so beautifully and creatively offered:

November bounty
brings food to our tables.
November beauty
nourishes our spirits.
November blessing:
our gratitude for the
goodness, the gifts, the graces of Life.
Gracefully, gratefully
may we share the bounty
so those who are hungry may eat;
may we share the beauty
so that famished souls may revive;
may we share the blessing
so that all may find the Sacred
sitting on the doorstep of their hearts,
speaking through our laughter and love,
shining through mysteries, marvels
and the most mundane of moments.
May we share the blessing
so that we all my join
in a song of thanks-giving.

Tis the season of Thanksgiving! May thanksgiving be for us not just a national holiday but a practice: a practice that reminds us to celebrate our own priesthood; a practice that sustains us from the altars of our very lives! Amen.