

November 22, 2015
Numbers 6: 22-27
Rev. Joy R. Haertig

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our Strength and our Redeemer”

This morning I want to talk about the Practice of recognizing and pronouncing **Blessing**.

I count myself as lucky that I am actually paid to recognize and pronounce blessing! At the end of every worship service, at weddings and memorial services, baptisms and communion, anniversaries, graduations, dinners and banquets, in hospitals and private homes as people are nearing their death--- I have gotten to name and witness, out loud, what already existed, long before I proclaim any specific words of blessing **because sacredness (blessing) is everywhere**. Creation is lit up by the blessing, grace, and the primal kindness of the Divine – I am simply honored to get to name it.

I expect that the blessing we heard from the Book of Numbers sounded familiar to many of you this morning. This benediction has long been used by Jewish communities’ and by the Christian church to conclude services of worship. These are words given as a gift for the journey of departure into our daily living. I imagine that many of us had no idea that it came from Jewish scripture. It was taught to the Nazirites – male and female individuals who had taken a vow of consecration for a special vocation among the people of God. The Nazirites are sometimes called the monks and nuns of ancient Israel. It was understood that though they were the ones that said the benediction – it was God who was acting through them. They would give witness to the primal kindness of God that was given to everyone: **“Yhwh bless you, and keep you. Yhwh make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. Yhwh lift up his face toward you, and give you peace.”** God’s blessing was benevolent – was not hidden – was glowing; not glaring or judging. (Commentary by Terence E. Fretheim – www.workingpreacher.org)

While some religious traditions have concluded that only certain people can offer blessings and have been “consecrated” to do so by the hand of God, with all due respect, I believe it is a big mistake to perpetuate this illusion.

Perhaps one of the reasons this happens is that we think blessing is an act of **conferring** holiness --- as if it were not there to begin with – and most of us don't think we have the power to confer holiness.

As I said at the beginning of my reflection this morning, I believe that the practice of pronouncing of blessing is not to confer it --- **it is to recognize and name what is already there.** All of us have that ability and that right.

To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective. It is to participate in what writer Barbara Brown Taylor calls "God's audacity." It is the ability to say to someone: "I see you" – I see you as the blessing – the miracle – the gift that you are as a beloved child of the Universe --- of God's.

Writer John O'Donohue writes these words about living from an attitude of blessing that seem especially poignant in light of world events:

"Despite all the darkness, human hope is based on the instinct that at the deepest level of reality some intimate kindness holds sway." (Benedictus, A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue, Bantam Press, 2007)

In light of the world events around us that so easily fosters fear of our safety – fear of one another – I believe that one of the most powerful ways we can counter the violence and fear is to hold fast to the primal kindness – the primal blessing – that is at the heart of all creation; see it and **name it in order to encourage one another to foster more kindness, more blessing; more compassion.**

Rabbi Menachem Creditor from Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA wrote these profound words in response to the attacks in Paris and other parts of the world: ***"We are commanded to live every second to its fullest, to devour with delight the marrow of life, to allow the sun to reach us through closed, grateful eyes, to see the light on each other's Divine Image. Most of all, our response to something we experience as an attack on civilization must spur us to deepen our personal and communal commitments to build the world from Love faster than anyone can tear it down.***

One of the ways we can work for peace in our world is to not fall prey to the cult of fear and judgment that some people are choosing to foster towards our Muslim brothers and sisters (all over the world), and instead seek to practice the art of living with our feet firmly planted in that primal blessing of kindness and mutual respect— **and not just for those you know and love, but also for the stranger --- for at one point or another – we have all been or will be, the stranger.** The brewing controversy whether our country should welcome Syrian refugees is an opportunity for us to deepen our personal and communal commitment to building a world from the base of primal kindness rather than fear. Providing sanctuary (shelter from violence/war/poverty) is one of the greatest blessings we can give to one another. I heard an interview with Ann Richards, the Assistant Secretary of State for immigration who said that through our immigration (vetting and placement) program we have resettled 3 million refugees and only a handful (a handful!!) of them have been a problem. Now that is a reality check for all of the fear, isn't it?

John O'Donohue writes: "In the parched deserts of post-modernity a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless each other. I believe each of us can bless. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighborhood of loving kindness...In a dead wall a new window opens; in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew." (Benedictus, A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue, Bantam Press, 2007) Providing sanctuary and respect to refugees fleeing war and oppression is just that – it is expanding the neighborhood of kindness – it is the opening of a dead wall into a new window of life; it can be the beginning of healing for a broken heart. Isn't that what we want to be a part of?

And much, much closer to home --- and much more personal ---

Off and on this past week I have thought of the "This is for you" anonymous letters that people in our congregation wrote and have distributed in various places in Magnolia and beyond. I

know that Scott left one in the bathroom on the ferry when he and Cameron were heading to Poulsbo. Imagine receiving a blessing in the bathroom!!! Those letters are blessings. They have the potential of awakening something in someone. They have the potential of reminding someone of their primal value --- it has been a way for our congregation to say: "I see you for the blessing that you are."

All creation has been blessed by a Divine grace; a primal blessing – it shines on us and shines through us. This morning I invite you to close your eyes and take a deep breath and hear these words from John O'Donohue on Blessing:

To believe in blessing is to believe that our being here, our very presence in the world, is itself the first gift, the primal blessing. As Rilke says: '*Hier zu sein ist so viel – To be here is immense.*'" (Benedictus, A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue, Bantam Press, 2007)

And then I invite you to consider all the other people in this sanctuary this morning --- take another deep breath --- their very presence in the world, is itself a gift – a primal blessing --- And now let's go even further and imagine those who are courageous and desperate enough to flee their homeland and risk their very lives for a new start --- they too are a gift in the world --- they too are a blessing...

This simple sanctuary... this community...this world... is brighter – lovelier – because all of us has inherited the gift of life – a place of beauty, meaning, order, creativity, compassion and love...We all belong here...we all deserve the opportunity to dwell in the primal kindness God has sewn into the fabric of all creation.

Can you feel a deep sense of blessing in your very being? In the beings next to you?

With all of that light around us, I invite you to SEE EACH OTHER --- to stand and greet one another as the blessings that you truly are.