

## Being Blessed

Menno Mennonite Church

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**Purpose:** To affirm the blessing of grace received in the coming of Christ.

**Message:** As with Jesus' baptism, we receive the blessing of God because we are God's beloved.

**Scripture:** Luke 3:15-17; 21-22; Isaiah 43:1-7 (to be recruited)

**Synopsis:** We spend a great deal of energy seeking approval. There is a basic human need to know that we are acceptable. We are no different in our spiritual selves. We are blessing seeking people. Yet we so often hesitate to give blessings to others. It can feel too complicated, or, alternately, too cheap. We make all these barricades to blessing to make sure that we do the work right to be properly qualified to receive blessing. But as God sees us, we are already not only deserving of grace and blessing. We need to do is ask to be blessed, and be ready to bless in return.

(Luke 3:15-17 NRS) <sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>1</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

<sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>1</sup> with you I am well pleased." <sup>2</sup>

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There is always a profound fascination to answering the phone in this job. You never quite know what it is going to earn you. Most of the time it is what it usually is—the typical unsolicited solicitation promising this that or the other. Only with the churchly bent most of the snake oil promises full pews and fuller offering plates if we just invest in their literal miracle cure. Other times it is people looking for a hand up or a handout—looking for the church to be the church. Sometimes you help them, sometimes you don't. You get pretty good and hearing the approach and the language that is crafted to tell you that they were good and faithful people who would be alright if you would only drive across town and pay their rent. In Tucson, there was a whole other category of phone calls that came asking—in Spanish—for Queso Mennonita, a soft white cheese made by the Mennonite Colonies in Mexico and known widely as the thing for tacos. You look up Mennonite in the phonebook, find one listing, and you go dialing for cheese. Again, can't help you; you got the wrong part of the Anabaptist family.

But every so often you are given the rare opportunity to do some good. I will always remember one call. It was a straight to the point, straight forward request. "Are you the Pastor? I would like you to bless me." That was all. Taken aback, I stalled for time, and asked for a bit of the back story. Things had been rough, family and what not. But sooner than I had hoped it came back: "You are the pastor, right? I want you to bless me. Please."

By now my brain had shifted into high gear, considering, to my shame, what sort of ploy this might be. What does he want? Who am I to bless anyone, let alone someone on the other end of the phone who I know nothing of? Theologically speaking, pastoral blessing isn't much of a Mennonite concept. My ordination, while important, does not grant me any greater license to bless than anyone else in the priesthood of all believers (weak argument I grant, but that is our thing). In the biblical tradition, it is God who blesses; never humans. Sure there might be people who deliver the message and all that, but it is always God who does the blessing (think Aaron who stretches his arms to bless Israel, the prophets who declare what God is doing to restore, Jesus who declares a new reality for people's lives). I don't have that power. At best I just pass on what has already been given. All of this is the 5 or so seconds I dithered with my theological concerns before I came upon the only actually relevant issue: Who am I to deny blessing from someone who asks for it? Ever. Regardless of the circumstances; regardless of the individual. So I blessed him. In an ad-libbed prayer I simply prayed that God might bless my friend on the other

end of the phone and sustain him in the things of this world. That was it. A thank you and goodbye. I blessed him and he appreciated it.

This, and experiences like it, remind me of one of our most human needs: the need to be granted approval. We have heard it time and again—I just don't know how to please them—and have felt it no doubt within ourselves at one point or another. It doesn't matter who the them happens to be—a parent, a spouse, a friend, even, in our minds, God. We want to know that we count, and often are at a loss to find a way to verifiably and believably find our way within that. Because we all need to know that we matter, that we are loved. Absent that it is hard to thrive in any real way. We need this in our personal lives. We need this in our Spiritual lives. We want to know that we have met approval, and we are generally doubtful, by-in-large, that God is in the business of granting such approval. This is why this voice from the heavens carries such weight. It isn't just the person and the place, but also the words that we all long to hear. We want to know that we are approved of by God. I think that is something we occasionally get wrong with our sense of baptism. Rather than inaugurating the blessing of God by conducting the magical act that confirms a blessing on us, we are recognizing and accepting the blessing of God in faith as guiding force in our lives, come what may.

I went shopping the other day to get a gift for Emily that ostensibly came from the kids. Not being one much for clothes buying in general and not hugely familiar with the clothes racks at Wal Mart in particular, I was struck with the amount of “I am blessed” paraphernalia. The #blessed where people publicly disclose their good fortune by tagging it as God's blessing was in full effect. There was every expression of gratitude one could imagine, though sometimes I wonder at where the line between gratitude and the humble brag was being drawn. In the market for a night shirt to fill out a pajama pairing, I selected the best there was and got on with my list. But I have often wondered at this notion within our culture of being blessed. I can fully get behind the conviction that the loving God has met many of us in North America with uncommon good fortune while continuing to question is that is something that you want to point out for the world to see, let alone to merchandise along the way. For if we are blessed, we must, always, wonder why, as in “to what end?” I have no problem claiming the blessing that is mine, but in the claiming I am all the more convicted of my responsibility to extend that blessing to others beside myself. When we recognize our blessing, when we recognize that God is indeed pleased with us, it ought to be the foremost spur to our conscious to go and do likewise there ever was.

Yet we jealously guard our ability to bless others, both physically and, more so, emotionally and spiritually. Like I was on the phone, we find ourselves far more wrapped up in the mechanisms of what it might mean and why to get down to the work of passing the blessing on within the simplest and only rationale of “because you too, are beloved, no matter who you are.” Sometimes the biggest struggle for us to get over ourselves is to wrap our heads around the possibility that God loves us. Because it takes some doing to consider. The creator of the universe in all its infinite, mind boggling complexity, loves me, and not just because I behave myself and appropriately give when asked to, but because the child of God within me is valued beyond measure. The biggest difficulty in obtaining a sense of the love of God is not that God withholds it from us; that love is always there if we are willing to see it and know it. It that we ourselves insist that this love is either unavailable at all, too tied up in a troublesome history to be relevant, or that we are unqualified to receive it. It is wrapping our heads around the fact that Grace exists in the first place and convincing ourselves that we are qualified to reflect that grace to others that takes all the work. Theologian Paul Tillich’s definition of faith rings true: “Faith is our acceptance of God’s acceptance of us even though we know ourselves to be unacceptable.” It is in this faith, this acceptance that we can, in time, find a home, and from that home we can do what we are ultimately meant to be: the means by which this gracious faith is spread.

But when we know—really know—the blessing that is our, is the hallmark of faith, we can claim our blessing not as a birthright to be cashed in, but as the foundational identity that we can share with whomever we meet. We are people of faith who have been met with blessing—with the promise of God’s best wishes for us. But that, of itself, does not make us unique. It does not qualify us as different. It simply reveals to us the truth of God with us in all things that must be shared with all who would hear.

We woefully underestimate the power we possess to bless; even more so the power we carry to curse. We are loathe to go there in case we get it wrong, or find the wrong person in the wrong time and the wrong way to bless. We forget that we all need to hear the words that God speaks to each of us: “you, too, are beloved.” We forget that for ourselves, and find it way too awkward to say to anyone else. But we can do it. We can bless one another; we can pronounce—literally and figuratively—the pleasure of God to be with us, to come us, and walk beside us, no matter what. We need to do this for each other, because we know how easily we can forget. We can be dispensers of grace, not as magicians in the pretense that it makes all the

bad stuff go away, but to be that which we are called to be: the ambassadors of reconciliation we always have been.

Blessing seems an utterly simplistic prescription for bleeding world. I know that the words of blessing are the last ones we want to say because they are the last ones we are inclined to believe. But again, we all need to know that we matter, that we are loved, that we have the approval of that which matters on the most fundamental level. We can voice that which we each all need to hear, be blessed, and in receiving blessing, share blessing in return, allowing others to know that they have the approval of the one most high. For in this, there is a deep power to heal, to sustain, inspire, hold up and hold on, no matter what. May we share that as widely as we may.

I want to close today inviting you to pass the peace to each other. But I want to offer you a reminder. This is far more than simply that which we do from time to time when we are feeling high churchy. When we pass the peace of Christ to another, we speak on them blessing, a hope, and a promise of peace. You are blessing each other. You are praying for each other. And that is never something to be passed up or passed over. You are extending grace, just as grace has been extended to you. That is something we dare never underestimate in its importance or its power.

Let us pass the peace, blessing each other, spreading God's grace.