

Blessings Anyone?

A Sermon for Stewardship Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 6, 2016

Texts: Genesis 12:1-3

If I asked you to name a blessing in your life from this past week, would you have an answer? What would it be? (pause) And if I asked you how you have been a blessing to someone in this past week, would you have an answer to that? That one's a little tougher, isn't it. You'd have to think about that one a bit because usually when we are being a blessing to someone, we often don't know it. Like when you hold that door open for someone with their hands full, that can be more of a blessing than you realize. Like when you take that extra moment to offer a kind word to someone, or drop a note in the mail, or pick up the phone and call someone you think might be feeling a little down, that's being a blessing. We do things like that all the time, those little kindnesses we offer just because it seems like the right thing to do in the moment. That's why when we think about blessing, the noun of the verb to bless, it just doesn't seem like all that much to do. A blessing is a nice thing, a good thing. And to bless a situation or a person with something we do, that's a very nice thing. And yet, it just doesn't seem like such a big deal. But it is, and this morning's text from Genesis helps us to understand why blessing and being blessed is a very big deal.

Part of our confusion, or perhaps it's more of a lack of appreciation for the significance of blessing, comes from the different understandings of blessing in the two different contexts of our lives, the religious and the secular. For example, in the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, an obviously religious text, the verb bless has three specific meanings:

- 1) To bestow divine favor and confer divine benefits. That's the kind of blessing described in this morning's text from Genesis.
- 2) To adore God for God's goodness and return thanks. That's a lot of the Psalms.
- 3) To invoke God's favor on someone. That's also in this morning's text as the one of the expectations of Abram's blessing by God.

Now compare this with the secular definitions of bless from *Webster's Dictionary* :

- 1) To hallow or consecrate by religious rite;
- 2) To make the sign of the cross on or over;
- 3) To invoke divine care for; (well, that's a little similar)
- 4) To praise, glorify;
- 5) To confer prosperity or happiness upon;
- 6) To protect, preserve.

Funny, isn't it, that when you take God out of the sense of the word bless, it just doesn't have the same impact, the same weight

to it. For one thing, the secular definition reduces the act of blessing to mundane physical action – to consecrate by religious rite or to make the sign of the cross – or to just words. Praise and glorify what? Ourselves? Why? To what purpose? To confer prosperity or happiness or protection? That feels like some sort of power dynamic where one person decides another person is or is not worthy of something. On what basis we have to wonder? Who decides what's fair? What's just? Yes, blessing without God feels a bit empty. Maybe even a bit too subjective for comfort. And yet blessing remains for us in the church a powerful word.

These few verses we read this morning from Genesis mark a significant shift in the relationship between God and the man he had chosen to be the patriarch of the Israelites. This text actually lays out a rather specific agreement between God and Abram, soon to become Abraham. The first verse is a command from God to Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to that land that I will show you.” Go where I tell you to go, God says to Abram. Interesting that God doesn't say why. God doesn't explain God's reasoning for this command. God just says do it.

God does, however, explain what will happen if Abram does as commanded. “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.” If you do this thing I am telling you to do, God says to Abram, then I

will do something for you. You and your ancestors will become a great nation. You yourself will be a great and well known man. You will be so great that you will be a blessing to others just by being who you are. Two interesting points are contained within this little exchange between God and Abram. First God's promise of blessing contains within it the expectation that God's command will be fulfilled by Abram before the blessing is given. You will do what I tell you to do in order to get the blessing, God says. This is a quid pro quo situation, for sure. God has expectations which Abram must meet. No freebie blessings here just for Abram being a nice guy. He's got to do something specific. He's got to leave everything and everyone he knows and just travel until God tells him to stop.

Now, granted, if he does this, there's a lot in it for him. Power, fame, and everything that comes with those two things. But still, no freebies. Time for you to put your actions where your mouth is, Abram, God says. It's time to step up and step out in faith. Do what I tell you to do because I tell you to. So, there's definitely a power dynamic in play here and God has all the power. Or does he? What would have happened, do you suppose, if Abram said no. No, I don't want to go. No, I like where I am just fine, thank you very much. No, I have all I need right here? If Abram had said no, is that when the cursing would have kicked in? Would God have gotten angry? Would God have taken it all

back? We don't know. Because Abram didn't say no. Abram did as God commanded. Apparently it didn't occur to him NOT to. And therein lies the difference between Abram and us.

That also brings us to the second interesting point in this exchange between Abram and God. And clearly, Abram was smart enough to pick up on this right away. Implicit in God's promise of blessing to Abram if he followed God's command to go to a new land guided by God, he would become a great leader of a great people is one thing – power. Abram would have to have power to accomplish what God was promising to bless him with. Abram would have to have power to be a great leader, to find his way forward overcoming who knows what challenges and difficulties. Abram would also need wisdom and faith and courage to be all these things God promised him he would be. Abram knew that God would provide him with whatever he needed to become this incredible person God was saying he could become and that's why Abram did as God asked. Abram trusted God to provide what would be needed so that God's promised blessings to Abram would become reality.

Abram's faith, Abram's trust in God is why we can claim to be heirs of that ancient promise still today. We are the part of those families of the earth still claiming Abram's blessing from God today. We are still being blessed by God just as God blessed Abram, blessed to be blessings on God's behalf in the world.

Imagine that! Circles of blessings that have come down through the millennia originating in that ancient blessing given by God to Abram and continuing on through us into the future spiraling onward as far as we dare imagine. Blessed to be a blessing – that’s us here in God’s church, and it always has been.

But what does that mean for us today, exactly? How is God asking us to be a blessing as individuals, as a church? Uncovering, recovering, discovering all the possible answers to that question is the work of the church! It’s what we do all the time. We know we are called by God to be blessings in the world. We even know the basic boundaries within which we do that blessing work. Jesus taught us that! We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. How we make that teaching of Jesus alive in our lives and in this church each week IS how we become a blessing to the world outside our doors. We do that as individuals who strive to be followers of Jesus making a difference in the world. The church is where we come to figure out what to do and how to do it. The church is where we come to practice what it means to be a blessing and to be strengthened in this always challenging business of blessing. The church is where we come to be nurtured for this work and sustained in the doing of it. The church is where we come to remember who and whose we are and why it matters

in this fragile, broken world where blessing seems like an increasingly rare commodity.

The simple truth is, dear friends, that our church – the one we support with our pledges today and with our gifts and offerings each week – is our bridge to the blessings God promised to Abram and still promises to us today. Like Abram, we still must follow God’s command and go to do what God needs us to do. For most of us that going is fairly simple, like going to church for worship or a meeting or going to visit a friend who needs some help or going to work on some sort of service project like the WARM Center meals or going to dig in the pollinator garden. Like stretching a little more than we thought we could with our financial gifts to this church.

God calls us to go and do and God showers us with blessings just as God promised so long ago. Blessings come in many forms – everything from a breathtaking sunrise to a sticky smile from a four year old with an ice cream cone. But blessings they are. And blessings we become over and over again, if we just remember to be who God asks us to be, doing what God asks us to do. Blessed to be a blessing. I’m in. How about you? Amen.