

Benediction

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

When it comes time for a parting word, what is to be said? What do you say when that time comes? It might be ‘farewell,’ ‘so long,’ ‘take care,’ ‘catch you later,’ (alligator can be added as an option). Sometimes, we might turn to other languages or cultures and use ‘adios,’ ‘adieu,’ ‘shalom,’ ‘cheerio.’ The energetic character, Tigger, in the Winnie the Pooh children stories would blurt out, “TTFN,” - ta ta for now. I like ‘goodbye,’ in part because this word descended from the longer phrase, ‘God bless you,’ and because it is more than simply wishing the other well as some kind of separation ensues. Additionally, it is nice to be reminded of the blessing nature of our God. When my wife, Nancy, and I attended a wedding that did not have an overt religious focus, we joked that one of us ought to fake a sneeze, so the other could say loudly toward the couple, “God bless you.” Excuse me for putting it this way, but saying “God bless you,” is nothing to sneeze at. Such an expression does not compel a reluctant God to say, “Okay. I didn’t really want to bless that particular person, but twist my arm, I will if you say so.” Rather, our God is one who blesses generously, and as we face the challenges currently before us, we need God’s blessings.

In our Reformed practice, a benediction at the conclusion of a worship service is a parting expression calling upon a congregation to be mindful of the blessings that come from God. We pastors have no power over those blessings, but in the forty-one years of serving five different congregations, including the two years I have had the joy of serving here as an interim associate pastor, I would say that among the great privileges I have been afforded as a pastor is to get to express the good news about God’s blessing nature as the congregation is being sent out from a worship service. For a benediction, many pastors have used some form of the concluding words that the Apostle Paul writes at the end of what is called Second Corinthians. This book may be a compilation of several letters

that Paul wrote to this Grecian congregation that he helped to get started, a congregation that frankly knew its share of conflicts and problems, sometimes with Paul himself. In today's reading from that book, Paul begins his parting words with a bit of a charge: "put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace." But then he concludes with much more than 'TTFN.'

In what is about as close as we get to a trinitarian expression in all of scripture, Paul is teaching inspirationally through these last pen strokes of his epistle. His words are reminders of the amazing and expansive grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. He follows that with a celebration of the deep, steadfast, infectious love of God. Then he mentions the powerful richness of a communal relationship of the Holy Spirit. Most biblical scholars don't think Paul had a fully-developed trinitarian construct in his theology, but we can get the sense of the relationships within the Godhead being so blessed, that the goodness of that blessing overflows into our lives. When we pastors share a version of these words from Paul as a benediction, we get to articulate the grandest of invitations to recognize, relish, and respond to the richness of what God pours out upon us. What's more, even beyond the overflowing grace, love, and communion that are often the focus of these parting Pauline words, there are also the important words, 'with' and 'all' that we find here. May the blessings of God and God's own fullness be with you, with you through thick and thin, with you through times of joy and challenge, with you through the various chapters of individual, family, and communal life. And may these blessings be with all of you, Paul says – not just with the ones who were always on his side or those whose dedicated service was deepest. May these divine blessings and God's own self be with all of you.

Those are among the blessings that come out through God's presence and nature, but there are other blessings from God that we don't always recognize as such. There is a benediction that didn't originate with Saint Francis, but has been used within the order of Franciscans that goes like this:

*May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.
May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.
May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war;
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbors
who are poor.*¹

There are many different blessings which come from God. In our reading from the book of Genesis, we heard a bit of the beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah, who were initially known as Abram and Sarai. Here is a childless, senior adult couple, neither of whom were particularly virtuous. As they were being directed to move to a new place, a time of transition into a totally new landscape for them, God promises to make of

¹ <https://brianmclaren.net/a-franciscan-benediction/>

them a great nation, adding this statement: “I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing.” Then later in the passage, God says, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

I have seen many ways in which this congregation has been blessed by God. I hope you recognize the blessings all around you in this place: there has been and will continue to be great pastoral leadership, excellent staff and lay leaders, worship that is uplifting and fulfilling, abundant opportunities for education and supportive relationships. The facilities and other resources offer a tremendous and functional base for mission. / Our church website was significantly revamped a couple of weeks ago. On its homepage is this new, brief description of who BMPC is: “Together we: welcome generously, love deeply, act boldly.” I hope that’s an accurate description of who we are. But if not, then we have this inspirational challenge to be a blessing to others as God enables us to be who we are called to be. Each one of us and all of us have experienced God’s blessings, not always in the same ways. It dishonors our God who blesses when we hoard our blessings or when we receive them with indifference. When we do recognize those blessings, which are not earned, but which flow out of God’s goodness, then we have the additional possible blessing of the experience of gratitude. Poet Joyce Ruff, in a poem entitled, ‘Gratitude,’ starts with these two lines:

To be grateful for what is, instead of underscoring what is not.

To find good amid the unwanted aspects of life, without denying the presence of the unwanted.²

² Joyce Ruff, ‘Gratitude,’ found in *The Circle of Life: The Heart’s Journey Through the Seasons*, Sorin Books, 2005.

There is much more to gratitude than that, but it is out of an experience of gratitude that we can be inclined to share God's blessings with others as we as a congregation seek to welcome generously, love deeply, and act boldly. Then, as others experience being blessed, there is the possibility that they might continue the waves of blessings going out until all are reached with additional expressions of God's goodness.

As I come to the conclusion of my pastoral service to this congregation, I am filled with joyful gratitude for the opportunity to have served God and I hope to have served you, in this place. Pastors' work is never really done, but our calling to a particular congregation does conclude, so I recognize that I have been richly blessed to have gotten to journey with you as one of your pastors over these last two years, as I have witnessed many expressions of your faithfulness, compassion, dedication, and care. Some of you have also entrusted me to walk with you through difficult experiences. Thank you, so very much. As I take leave of my duties here, I am deeply, deeply blessed that I can entrust you to God's ongoing care, as the One who will continue journeying with you and blessing you as you move forward, even as you go, like Sarah and Abraham, through many changes in this time of challenge. I am excited for you to be blessed by the gifts of your new associate pastor of congregational care, the Reverend Melanie Hardison, who will carry forward duties I have had, along with a few more. I am confident that a great interim senior pastor will come following the conclusion of Agnes' rich ministry here. I look forward to finding out how you will share your many blessings of God's grace, love, and communion with others here and beyond this place in the time to come.

God has the capability to carry out the proclamation of good news without human help. God could choose to dip a finger in a cloud and write a big

“God loves you” in the sky without depending on unreliable messengers like Abraham and Sarah, Paul, you and me. God could simply snap divine fingers and heal the sick. The brokenness and violence of the world could be wiped out in the blink of God’s eye. However, we have a God who chooses to operate in ways that richly blesses people like us with the divine initiative of grace, love, and communion, and then calls us to meaningful lives as an additional blessing as we share those divine blessings. Some of us are called to serve as pastors, but all of us are called to be those who carry out the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. Our credentials for being called by God to such a role have more to do with the One who blesses, accompanies and sends us, than with our own resume. As we assess our blessings as a congregation and as individuals, may God indeed bless us with just enough foolishness to believe, by the abundant presence of God’s grace, love, and communion, that we can make a blessed difference in this world that so desperately needs it. With all of that, I am delighted that I don’t need anyone to sneeze in order to give me the excuse to say to you, “God bless you.”

Amen.