

To Be a Blessing

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I take as my text the second half of the third verse of the twelfth chapter of Genesis, "And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The "you," of course, is Abram. That's the historical you, the you who first heard these divine words in such a way that they've been treasured by three of the world's great religions, to one or another of whom most of the world's people belong.

First Jews, then Christians, and then Muslims all laid claim to being the physical and spiritual heirs of Abram and Sarai. Today that means that 3.8 billion of us, roughly 54% of the earth's human population, consider ourselves the children of Father Abram and Mother Sarai. What does that mean? Does it matter? Do we care?

A few verses on from today's text is the change to the more familiar form of their names, Abraham and Sarah, and for the sake of convenience, let's use those forms for the rest of our thinking. The Bible says that this name change reflects a change in calling; the Bible's first monotheist will be the spiritual ancestor not of one chosen people, but of multitudes of them, too many to count, like the grains of sand on the sea shore.

Can anyone doubt that biblical prophecy does, in some way, come true? Even the most casual reader of the Bible and observer of the world would have to acknowledge that this ancient prediction has come to pass: a multitude of people, the vastness of which we can only estimate, believe that this ancient Bedouin is their spiritual ancestor.

A skeptic, naturally, would simply say it's a coincidence. One very general statement in the Bible aligns with one very general demographic fact about the world. So what? What's the big deal about being Abraham's descendant?

John the Baptist also called that question when his religious contemporaries made too much of their status as Abraham's children. John said that God could raise up children to Abraham from stones, and that what makes a true child of Abraham is not the privilege of a name or ancestry, but rather the lifestyle of a calling, the calling to be a blessing so that the world, through us, may be blessed.

That's the theme of this year's stewardship campaign, which you've seen on posters throughout the church: "Blessed to be a blessing." This is blessing, we might say, with a mission or blessing with a purpose. The giving back of those who have been blessed or, as secular folks today like to say, paying it forward.

Whatever phrase you want to use, the basic truth in the Bible's perspective on blessing is that it's never a done deal. A blessing received never stops with the receiver. A blessing – or, to be more theologically precise about it, to be blessed by God – always lays a responsibility on the one who has been blessed. And as we used to sing around the bonfire at church camp, the responsibility that comes with a blessing is to pass it on.

The most famous string of blessings in the world are the Beatitudes that open Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Beatitude is simply the Latin word for blessedness, and there are eight or nine Beatitudes in Matthew, chapter 5, depending on who's doing the counting.

The first one says this: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Few of us would say we're poorly blessed; most of us consider ourselves richly

blessed, even speaking spiritually. And there's program after program and book after book telling us how to enrich or deepen or develop our spiritual lives.

But Jesus says that it's the poor, rather than the rich in spirit who are blessed. Might that be because it's the people who are most aware of their own sinfulness who know most keenly God's unfailing grace, and who are most likely to consider that knowledge good news and to share it? Would that not make them the blessing by which others are blessed? Would that not make them true sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah?

Christians for many centuries have interpreted the Beatitudes eschatologically, that is, telling us something about the end of the world. The blessings such as the kingdom of heaven and comfort and inheriting the earth and so forth will happen after the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. And I think this interpretation is partly correct. Jesus didn't believe that we would bring final salvation to the world; God will do that.

But he also believed that we can be part of that process, which is already underway; and so the kingdom of God is already among us, and those of us who are poor enough in spirit to see that are truly blessed. The blessing is for both for now and later.

Whenever people bring their pets to me for a blessing, I always ask God to continue to make the animal a blessing to the person with him or her, because I know that this companion creature has already been, is now, and always will be a blessing for the person who's gone to the trouble of asking for the blessing. Blessedness is always for now and later.

And we don't know how God may use us in the mysterious business of blessing. We never fully know the impact, for better or for worse, we make on other lives.

Some of you may remember the movie *October Sky*, which was about the life of rocket scientist Homer Hickam, a coal miner's son who grew up poor in West Virginia. Hickam wasn't athletic or popular like most of his peers, but he was fascinated by the world around him. He was what we would call today a science geek. And although he didn't fit in with most of the other kids, a science teacher recognized both his curiosity and his intelligence, and Hickam credited her, many years later, with making him the NASA scientist he became. That science teacher was one of the great blessings in Homer Hickam's life, which allowed him to become a blessing in ours. Hickam passed the blessing on.

What will you do with the blessing that is your life? You may think that now that your kids are raised and on their own, you've done your job, but I'd suggest otherwise. Families are often a great blessing, to be sure, but our lives are much more than who brought us into the world or who we brought into the world. That's just the beginning; the real blessing is an unfolding, mysterious process of love and joy and sorrow – yes, even sorrow can be a blessing to the discerning spirit – in which we are all invited by God to participate.

I want to close this morning with a quote that's rather long and, to my mind, very beautiful. It's a prose poem by a man named Max Ehrmann, who was born in Terre Haute, Indiana. It's "Desiderata," which means "Things to Be Wished For," and it's always sounded to me, since I first encountered it in college, to be a description of what we might call a blessed life. Ehrmann wrote it in 1927, and here's what he said.

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

The Biblical word for "blessed," in both Hebrew and Greek, is "happy." Strive to be happy.