

"What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Pronouncing Blessings"  
Acts 2:1-11

Today's spiritual practice is that of pronouncing blessings. Most of us learned to say, "Bless you," when someone sneezes. This is especially interesting nowadays in light of the ongoing pandemic. The simple acts of sneezing or coughing are now met with suspicion and fear because of the virus. Yet, I think when someone sneezes it is exactly the time we should bless them. One of the origins of this practice of blessing people when they sneeze goes back to the 6th Century when it was a sign of the plague. Pope Gregory the Great suggested that it might be a good idea to bless people when they sneezed. Blessing someone when they sneeze is almost a universal practice all over the world and in many cultures. Offering a blessing after a sneeze goes back in history to at least Greco-Romans times. And it was thought that not just physical health was a concern, but according ancient superstitions saying "bless you" would help prevent evil from claiming that person.

I think in this simple practice, people have recognized the need to bless others in their time of need. It is a choice to act with love instead of fear. So today as we look at this practice of blessing others, the invitation is to bless all whom we encounter in any way we can. In the Bible we hear about people blessing each other often. To bless someone is to recognize the image of the divine that is within that person and to connect with it. It is also an alternative to judging others. Instead of sizing up people or judging them in good or bad ways, the invitation is to see them as God's presence in the world, especially in times of great need.

That is the transformation that took place for the early disciples of Jesus. Instead of being isolated from others, when the Holy Spirit touched them, they were moved to bless others and to share the power of God's love with them, especially those who were different from them. They recognized the deep human longing for healing. The feast of Pentecost originated in the Jewish festival of the Feast of Firstfruits (Deuteronomy 16:9-12), which was called "Pentecost" because it came fifty days after Passover! All were to gather at the Temple to make their offerings out of the abundance of their harvest and to thank God. After the offering was given at the Temple, the family was to gather for a celebratory meal and remember the giving of the law at Sinai to Moses and to the people of Israel. But this meal was not for them alone. They were to invite to the meal "your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, the strangers, the orphans and the widows" with whom you have a relationship in order to share your abundance with them. This was the way for them to live out the commandment they were given at Sinai, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" Deuteronomy 16:12a. This was not just a religious holiday. It was a way to help reverse poverty and powerlessness in the community.

The disciples were huddled in a room because they were afraid, but when they felt the touch of the Holy Spirit, they were moved to go out and share it with others. I love the way they blessed others. They crossed the barriers of language while honoring the uniqueness of each person. They did not speak one language, and everyone understood them. The Holy Spirit honored the uniqueness of each ethnic group. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to see their deep connection with all the people of the earth. It helped them to see how God was wanting them to reach out to all the people and not just their people. The Holy Spirit enabled them to see beyond the limits of their fear and disappointments. It was at that moment that they were mobilized for action to continue the mission of Jesus by sharing love and blessings with those who needed the good news of love and peace. In a world ruled by violence and domination, these disciples brought a message of embracing differences and of seeing the sacred in all. What a radical experience that must have been!

There are important lessons for us in this story about how to practice blessing others.

1. Recognizing the Sacred in Others: Blessing others is not about bringing them something they don't already have. It is about bringing awareness to the sacred that is already there. The disciples used the

language of the people they encountered. One of the key pieces to bridging differences with people of different cultures is being able to speak to each other. The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to speak so that others may understand. It helped them bridge one of the basic human barriers by honoring what was already there in the other. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "a blessing does not confer holiness. The holiness is already there, embedded in the very givenness of the thing...Because God made these beings, they share in God's own holiness, whether or not they meet your minimum requirements for a blessing...To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective." That is what happened to the disciples. They saw everything and everyone in that moment from the divine perspective.

2. **Blessing Others Is about Compassion:** Since our normal ways of communication and of viewing others tend to separate us by focusing on the things that we don't hold in common or on the things that we judge (negatively or positively) about others, blessing others helps us to open up to the possibility of transformation and healing in all. In our Bible story, some people judged the disciples and even scoffed at them thinking that they were drunk. Yet, the disciples blessed all who were in their presence. Those who deserved it and those who didn't. Taylor writes, "Blessing prayers...decide that given a choice between a blessing and a curse, a blessing will do more to improve air quality."

3. **Everyone Can Bless:** At Pentecost, there was no hierarchy of who could speak and share their blessing. All of the disciples were moved to share and each was given what they needed for that to happen. Taylor writes, "Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and to recognize... holiness." It is tempting to think that only pastors or people of a "high" spiritual status are the ones to confer blessings on others. Yet, the truth is that we all have the same access to the power of the Holy Spirit because we are all created in the image of God.

The blessing of others saved the disciples themselves. For the first time after the resurrection, they became aware of their own ministry and their own blessing. We often talk about Pentecost as the birthday of the church. In the same way, when we are touched by the Spirit of God, we are invited to bless others. We are to see everyone and everything as an opportunity to pronounce a blessing.

To practice this today, I am going to invite you to think of three people you encounter on a regular basis. It could be people in your own home or outside of your home. You can start with people that are easy to bless and then progress into blessing people who are difficult for you to bless. Make a commitment to bless them each day through the following steps:

1. **Pause and Behold:** Pause for a few seconds to behold the presence of God in the person you are about to bless. Pay attention without judgment. Try to see them as God sees them (a good place to start for that may be to see them as their pets see them).
2. **Bless them out loud or in your spirit:** John O'Donohue writes that, "A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen." Draw in your mind's eye a circle of light around that person. If words come to you, that is fine, but if not, don't worry about it. The point is the act of blessing.
3. **Pause and Receive:** Often when we bless others, we connect more deeply with our own sense of the divine. Pause for a moment to receive that gift.

Friends, may this simple practice help you to expand your ability to see the whole world as God sees it, with all of its brokenness, splendor and potential. May the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord be kind and gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.