

“BLESSING THE WORLD”

Psalms 126 & 128; Matthew 5:13-16

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The first book I read in 2022 was a book about grammar. It was more interesting than it sounds – really! The premise of *Grammar for a Full Life* is that a better understanding of how language works can help us to think more clearly about ourselves and our world and our place in it. The author, Lawrence Weinstein, believes that the ways we say things can limit us, or they can enlarge us. He contends that the way we use language shapes how we act, how we *are*. He says that a command of grammar can help us to speak or write not just “properly” but in ways that bring clarity, empower us, and foster empathy with others.

He touches on the often-noted distinction between active and passive voice. If you’ve ever done any writing, you’ve probably learned that active voice is considered a stronger way to express an idea. “You were prayed for in worship this morning” sounds a bit distant and flat compared to “We prayed for you.” But Weinstein says very interesting things about this active-passive distinction. First of all, he says that sometimes an active expression isn’t the most helpful way to say something. For example, to say “I won the person of the year award” presumes too much. Surely there could have been others equally deserving, and of course no one gets anywhere completely on their own. Much better – and more humble, too - to say, “I was the recipient of this award.” But Weinstein goes on to say that, to live well in the world, we really need a way to be somewhere in between those extremes of passive receptivity and proactive self-confidence. Unfortunately, the English language is lacking in ways to express that. However, Weinstein, says: “A curious – and beautiful exception is the formula that ... begins with the auxiliary verb *may*.” (p. 58)

I read that, and I thought, “That’s *our* language.” That’s the language of people of faith. That’s the language of blessing.

“May the road rise up to meet you.

“May the grace of Christ be with you.”

“May there be peace on earth.”

The language of blessing is a language of possibility. It invites a bigger vision of what-isn’t-yet-but-could-be.

It’s language of commitment, in that, when we use it, we are not just expressing a vague hope but allying ourselves – our desires and our energy - with that hope.

It’s language that invokes the presence and power of God, not just in acknowledging God as the Source of all that is good, but also because it understands that many good things are not within our power as individual human beings.

Claiming the language of blessing helps us to think in a really profound way about who we are as people of faith, and what it means to live out that faith in the world. I'll come back to that.

First, I want to remind us that the Bible is full of examples of blessing. You may have noticed that we're using a lot of those scriptures throughout our service this morning. They don't all use the word "blessing" or a formula like "may you be..." but it's kind of implied.

"The Lord bless you and keep you." (Numbers 6:24)

"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." (Psalm 126:5)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matthew 5:3)

"May the God of steadfast love and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another." (Romans 15:5)

It's there from the very beginning, in the Genesis creation stories. When God makes the world, and provides for all the earth's creatures, and calls it all "good" ... that is a blessing. Both the very act of creating (speaking the creation into existence!) and then pronouncing it good, express God's desires and hopes for the world and for the humans who are said to be made in God's image. This original blessing lays out not a pre-programmed machine but a universe of possibility, sustained by love and grace. It is immense and all-encompassing. The practice of blessing begins with God, and continues in the words and actions of God's people.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible we find many stories of individuals receiving God's blessing, and passing it on. Fathers bless their sons. Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law. Moses blesses the people in the wilderness, and he blesses Joshua, his successor. Some of the songs we call Psalms are blessings for the king, and some bless the community of God's people. The blessings are often about abundance and healthy, productive land, about children and descendants, about long life. They are about a future. They are also about having a place, a home, a community. They are about justice. They are about peace and safety. The subtext is always life in harmony with God.

Sometimes – often – in the Bible a blessing is an invitation: "Do this, so that you may live at peace in the land God is giving you," or "Pay attention to what you've been taught, so that you may walk in God's ways." There are people who have latched on to some of these Biblical texts in a way that misses the nuance of invitation; they preach that if you do this or that, pray in a particular way, or believe hard enough, that will be a kind of key that unlocks God's blessings for you – usually in the form of wealth. I am convinced that this "prosperity gospel" misunderstands the nature of the blessing of God. It replaces that sense of participating alongside God in an open-ended possibility with a transaction for personal gain, and it ignores the larger story of God's intentions for us.

Jesus spoke blessings at the beginning of his sermon on the mount, and those blessings continue to surprise us, with a sense of "blessedness" that has nothing to do with material advantages and everything to do with a way of life. Jesus' actions underscored his words, as he blessed countless people – mostly ordinary, suffering people - through his healing touch.

The writers of the letters to the early church loved blessings, and the epistles of the Apostle Paul, especially, are filled with this language. To me, this makes total sense: the future of the church was unknown. Nobody could even say whether this little gathering of believers in Ephesus or that one in Rome would manage to stick together. But the preachers and teachers believed that Jesus was drawing people into a lasting movement. They wanted the fledgling Christians in their care to see themselves as God's beloved children, given a purpose in following Jesus, able to rely on the Spirit's strength... and as a community with a future. The blessing words of the Apostles helped to make that possibility the church's reality.

A blessing doesn't have to be in words, but from the Bible we learn that words, especially words of blessing, have power. You might remember the story of Jacob: even though he tricks his father into giving him the firstborn blessing that should have gone to his brother Esau, that blessing couldn't be withdrawn, and it changed the trajectory of his life. We aren't used to thinking of our words as powerful, but they can be; we can choose whether they will be words that bless. We can consider whether what we say will open up possibilities or cut them off. We can be attentive to the Spirit, who will sometimes help us find the words of wisdom or healing or compassion that a moment calls for.

We also learn from scripture that blessing can be as simple as salt, and as profound and powerful necessary as light.

And we learn that this is what we are meant for. Not for saving our own souls or staking a claim to God's favor or even preserving the faith as we've been taught it, but blessing the world.

The language of "blessing" helps us understand what it means to be God's children in our world. We are not in charge, but neither are we powerless.

"Blessing" is really what human beings have been called to from the beginning of time. It's a big part of what it means that we are made in the image of God. As Christians, we don't believe that God made the world and then bowed out; we believe that God's creative work continues to unfold in the world. God is always "doing a new thing." And God lets us be partners in that work. I've heard this referred to "co-creating" with God. We could just as well call it blessing the world.

"Blessing" is what the church is about as it carries on the ministry of Jesus in the world. We call it being "the body of Christ." Jesus blessed people with his presence. When we embody his love and compassion for someone else, we are blessing them, in his name.

We are participants in the work of God in the world. Our work is to share in God's work of blessing the world. Anybody can help or serve others. But *blessing* is the particular language – the modus operandi, the gift – of people of faith.

I want to come back to that notion that "blessing" falls into this space somewhere between passive and active; it's fully engaged; it's also accepting and receptive.

“Blessing” helps us understand that this work of loving the world in Jesus’ name is not coercive. (Christians really should always have understood that forcing people to convert at swordpoint wasn’t our calling.) Blessing is deeply respectful of another. Blessing has a humility about it; it’s willing the good, while realizing that we don’t know everything there is to know about what that means. Blessing is willing the good, while relinquishing control. Blessing puts our trust not in what we can do but in God’s love.

But if it’s not “in control,” this work isn’t fatalistic either. We don’t just sit passively on our hands and say, “whatever will be will be. It’s all up to God. God will fix it or maybe God won’t.” Because God has called us to be involved in this work, God’s work, of loving and blessing the world. Why? I don’t know. Sometimes we’re not that great at it. But God thinks we can do it. And God made us to do it. Every one of us.

We have gifts that God has given us for the purpose of blessing – all kinds of gifts. We have words we can speak – words of kindness, appreciation, encouragement, love. We have the capacity for empathy and solidarity. We have our own experiences of God’s love we can draw on to reach out to others. We can share what we have learned. We can make space for other people to use their gifts and their voices. We can give our time to life-giving endeavors – feeding people, supporting the library, making music, making children laugh. We can make choices in our buying that reduce harm to our planet, or support struggling communities. We bless the world by engaging our faith to address issues of our day. We bless the world by being slow to judge, ready to listen, quick to help, faithful in prayer.

Every one of us can bless the world.

The simplest word or gesture can be profoundly meaningful - holy - when we offer it with the intent of blessing someone else.

Blessing can be a practice that changes us, inside: Our attitude toward others. Our expectations. Our desire for control. Our need to fix things. The feeling of hopelessness and helplessness we sometimes get stuck in. A tendency to be negative or cynical.

We can bless people in ways they see and feel, and we can bless people who may never know how we’ve held them quietly in God’s light.

We can bless people without agreeing with them, changing them, judging them, or asking anything in return.

I wonder...

Can “blessing” be a helpful way for us to think about the responsibilities we owe to our neighbors?

Could an intentional spirit of blessing enable us to better love those we find it hard to love?

Could an attitude of blessing help us find a way to relate to folks with whom we have little common ground without feeling that we're compromising our convictions?

Can a desire to "bless the world" help us think in creative ways about who we want to be as a church?

Can "blessing" be what it means to walk in love?

I'm going to close with this from writer Jan Richardson, who has made the blessing her particular form of poetry... and of ministry. It is a blessing for those of us who hear Jesus sending us out to be salt and light in the world:

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

Amen.

Resources:

Lawrence Weinstein, *Grammar for a Full Life: How the Ways We Shape a Sentence Can Limit or Enlarge Us*.

Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*