

February 20, 2022
“Blessed, Part 2 – The Fruit of Blessing”
Jeremiah 17:5-10 / Luke 6:27-38
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

You all know, of course, the widespread cultural practice of saying, “Bless you” – or for some, even “God bless you” – to someone who sneezes.

You may also know, through hearsay or with the magic of a quick internet search, that there are varying accounts as to the origin of this practice – with references going back to at least the first century.

Some accounts suggest it may initially have been seen as a sign of good health, and so the “bless you” response was an affirmation of that good health. But most accounts are not so positive.

One ties it to the Bubonic plague in 14th-century Europe, with sneezing a primary symptom – and so the response offered as a prayer to protect the sneezer from an otherwise certain death. Still other accounts are based on ancient superstition, with the belief that a sneeze could release one's spirit from their body – thus making them vulnerable to possession by evil spirits. Or with the belief that a sneeze released evil spirits from the body and therefore put others at risk – and so the blessing response was intended to protect both the person who sneezed and those around them.

Regardless of its origin, the practice is alive and well – if for no other reason than to be polite. I don't know about you, but at some point in my more cynical adult life, I can't remember when, I abandoned the practice myself because I decided that there was no good, rational reason to keep doing it. It felt like an obligatory social burden. It felt pointless.

Not surprisingly, the response is so well conditioned that I still think about it every time someone sneezes – when there are others around, waiting to hear if someone else will offer the blessing. And sometimes, offering it myself without even thinking about it.

Now you may be thinking to yourself, Why in God's name is he talking so much about sneezing?!

Rest assured, this is not a sermon about sneezing, it's a sermon about blessing. I share all that because I find myself wondering if, in my cynicism, I have been missing the opportunity to simply offer blessing. It may not be much, and there may not be much, if any, thought behind it, but it's still a blessing. And God knows, the world as we've rearranged it needs more blessing, not less.

The late Irish theologian and poet, John O'Donohue, lamented what he called the "lost art of blessing."

As those blessed first and foremost with this world and our presence in it, he lamented the absence of blessing as a ritualized practice within a broader cultural context that is gradually eroding our sense of connection to and with each other.

In his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, he wrote, "In the parched desert of postmodernity, a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another."

Last week we kicked off this two-part sermon series looking at the ROOT of blessing. In case you missed Part 1, allow me to quickly catch you up.

We looked at the four "beatitudes" and four "woes" that begin Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Plain, the grittier parallel to the more elaborate "Sermon on the Mount" found in Matthew's gospel.

Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep; blessed are you when people hate or exclude or revile you for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel. Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing; woe to you when all speak well of you.

In painting a portrait of the kingdom of God, Jesus lifts up the poor and hungry and affirms that in God's kingdom, no one is poor and no one is hungry. All are blessed with enough.

The root of such blessing is God. And because God is the root, BLESSING itself is the root. We are all grounded in a foundation of divine blessedness, a blessedness that from the

very beginning has connected us to and with each other. The ROOT of blessing. The root of BLESSING.

But as those so deeply blessed, we continue, in the kingdoms of THIS world, to disconnect from each other. We get in our own and each other's ways of seeing and experiencing and living out of that blessedness.

Where there is root, Jesus says repeatedly, there must also be fruit. And so we turn our attention this week from the root of blessing to the FRUIT of blessing. The fruit of BLESSING.

Which brings me back to John O'Donohue and the lost art of blessing.

He defines blessing as intention, as "a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal and strengthen. . . . A blessing awakens future wholeness" and "invoke(s) divine favor" on another's behalf.

As those who are fundamentally rooted in divine blessing, we are called to extend divine blessing TO – to be blessing FOR – each other. To bear the fruit of divine blessing with each other.

Even, Jesus says in continuing this "Sermon on the Plain," as Ursula just read for us, EVEN those who do not extend blessing to us. Who are not blessing for us.

"But I say to you that listen," THAT LISTEN, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." As those so richly blessed, extend the blessing even to those who hate you, who curse you, who abuse you. Love even your enemies, your opponents, all those who stand in the way of your individual and/or our collective well being.

Bless even those who do not bless you.

What would it mean for you, what would it TAKE for you, to love those you consider enemies or opponents? To love them by blessing them? To imagine a circle of light

drawn around them for protection and healing and strength, to invite future wholeness for them, to invoke divine favor upon them?

We are not, most of us, much of the time, particularly good at loving; ourselves, others and perhaps especially those who get in the way – cruelly, seemingly carelessly, sometimes violently – of our individual and/or collective well-being. Those who have deliberately caused us or others harm in one form or another, made life more difficult for us. Those toward whom we feel animosity, anger, rage, hatred. And justifiably so.

But all the same, Jesus reminds us that divine love requires this extraordinary extension of love because God's love is not selective. This is what the fruit of blessing ultimately looks like, to love and bless even those whom we regard as least deserving of it, as we love and bless ourselves. And the fruit of blessing marked by what Paul calls in his letter to the Galatians, the "fruit of the Spirit" – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

WAY easier said than done, WAY easier, but that's Jesus' point: Such love is not easy, but the kingdom of God depends on it.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? . . . If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? . . . If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? . . . But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for (God) is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your (Creator) is merciful."

What would it mean for you, what would it TAKE for you, to be merciful toward, to love and bless, even those you consider enemies or opponents? I don't know about you, but this is one of those really hard teachings I have trouble engaging in my daily life.

I mean, I believe it. I value it. I think I get it. But I can't ever seem to figure out how to actually put it into practice. I tend to go quickly in my mind to enemies on a larger scale, those with whom I have no direct contact and so no way of actually putting such instruction into practice. Trump, say, or white supremacist neo-Nazis. Love for enemies

like that is purely abstract, not worth my time or energy imagining. The rage is real, but I don't know how to get past it.

So maybe better if I, if we, start with baby steps. Let me suggest two when thinking about what it would mean, what it would take, to love our enemies.

The first is to start on a smaller scale. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Mere Christianity*, "better (to) start with something easier than the Gestapo." So we start with someone in our own lives. Someone we know and with whom we interact in our daily lives. Someone whom we likely don't think of as an enemy, per se, but do experience as offensive or irritating or annoying or difficult or disruptive for one reason or another. Someone more like what Anne Lamott calls, in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, an "enemy lite."

What would it mean for you, what would it TAKE for you, to soften your heart enough to love them? To bless them? To imagine a circle of light drawn around them for protection and healing and strength, to invite future wholeness for them, to invoke divine favor upon them? To see them as God's beloved?

Think about that someone or those someones for you. And think about what it would take. What's getting in the way of taking that step toward loving and blessing them? Or what spiritual practices might help you take that step toward actually loving and blessing them?

Back to Anne Lamott, she uses what she calls "God's In Box" – an actual box where she writes down on a piece of paper difficult situations or people she doesn't have energy or capacity or compassion to deal with in the moment, and places it in the box. She asks God to help her figure out what it might mean to love in that situation or to love that person. That's just one practice you might consider. That I might consider.

Valarie Kaur, whose "See No Stranger" memoir and manifesto on revolutionary love we're now studying together on Monday nights, suggests another simple practice that she now swears by, growing out of her Sikh faith. And that is to say in her mind, "Sister, brother, sibling, aunt, uncle" as she moves through her day, or "You are a part of me I

do not yet know," encouraging wonder, rather than judgment, about people she comes across, and particularly about those who are difficult or disruptive or destructive. Reminding herself of our shared humanity, our interconnectedness. Training herself to see others, even strangers, even opponents, as us, not them.

The second baby step in thinking about and practicing what it might mean, what it might take, to love our enemies, is to take a step back from love. To slow the process down.

On this week's episode of the public radio show/podcast, *On Being*, focused as it happens on the question of loving our enemies, Robert Thurman, a retired religion professor and the first American to be ordained a Tibetan Buddhist monk by the Dalai Lama, describes a space between hate and love that is found in some Buddhist traditions. A "midway station," he calls it, "where they talk about hatred, and the next step is non-hatred, and then, once you get non-hatred going, you can move over toward love and compassion."

So maybe don't rush ahead to what LOVE requires of you, but what NON-HATRED requires of you. Baby steps to soften our hearts and increase our capacity for love, because we can only love others, including our enemies, as well as we love ourselves.

As with John O'Donohue's working definition of blessing, moving toward love of those we consider enemies or opponents requires intention. An intention to bless those we consider enemies, or even those we consider offensive or difficult or disruptive, begins with an intention not to further fuel the destructive flames of enmity and resentment within us. Or separation between us.

That's why Jesus goes on in his sermon to discourage judgment and condemnation of others, and to encourage forgiveness. Because judgment and condemnation, justified as they may be, ultimately serve to build animosity and anger within us and further deepen the divide between us. Forgiveness is an act of blessing, beginning, always, as a blessing for ourselves, but an opening to the possibility of love for our enemies.

As O'Donohue writes, "The beauty of blessing is that it recognizes no barriers – and no distances. All the given frontiers of blockage that separate us can be penetrated by the loving subtlety of blessing. This can be the key to awakening and creating forgiveness. We often linger in the crippling states of anger and resentment. Hurt is always unfair and unexpected; it can leave a bitter residue that poisons the space between us. Eventually the only way forward is forgiveness."

What would it mean for you, what would it TAKE for you, to love – or at least not hate – those you consider enemies, or those you consider offensive or difficult or disruptive. What would it mean and what would it take for you to bless them? To imagine a circle of light drawn around them for protection and healing and strength, to invite future wholeness for them, to invoke divine favor upon them? To see them as God's beloved?

What would it mean for you and what would it take for you to be like the tree described in our reading from Jeremiah, "a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. . . . that (does) not fear when heat comes, and (whose) leaves . . . stay green; (which) in the year of drought . . . is not anxious, and . . . does not cease to bear fruit."

A tree rooted in divine blessing, bearing the fruit of divine love and blessing, even when enemies and opponents bring nothing but heat and drought.

O'Donohue again: "Even though it goes against the grain at first, when we practice sending blessing to those who have injured us, forgiveness begins to become possible. In situations you would expect to be wired with hard lines of justified resentment and bitterness, it is always surprising to discover beneath the surface fluent veins of compassion and forgiveness."

Friends, may we take steps, even baby steps, to go beneath the surface, toward fluent veins of compassion and forgiveness. To bear the fruit of blessing.

May it be so.