

**Psalm 103** Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.

2 Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—

3 who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,

4 who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

19 The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all.

20 Bless the LORD, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
obedient to his spoken word.

21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts,  
his ministers that do his will.

22 Bless the LORD, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul.

April 30, 2017

### Take, Bless, Break, Give

Psalm 103:1-5, 19-22

So, we hear in Psalm 103 that we are to “*Bless* the Lord,” but we also hear that Jesus *blesses* the bread before giving it to his disciples at the Last Supper. The book of James talks about how we use the same tongue to *bless* and to curse others. And, of course, there are the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount that tell us who the *blessed* are in the kingdom of God: the meek, those who mourn, and so on. What is all this blessing? How are we to bless the Lord, bless a meal, bless another person, and be blessed, especially when bad things happen to us?

Perhaps the place to start is with a mother and son who believe so much in the power of a blessing that they are willing to lie their husband and father in order to steal the blessing reserved for the older brother, Esau. In Genesis 27, Jacob and Rebekah plot to fool blind Isaac into thinking his second-born son, Jacob, is his elder son, Esau. They cover Jacob with animal hair and trick the poor old man. Isaac is confused – the soft voice is Jacob’s but the hair and the smell of wild game and outdoors is Esau’s, and Jacob gives to Jacob the blessing that belongs to Esau:

*May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!*

Why all this fuss over an old man’s words? What is so powerful about a blessing that it is worth stealing? What is a blessing, anyway?

First, a blessing starts with the identification, the acknowledgment of the secret, sacred power within this world. It is the ability to see that there is sacredness and holiness and mystery all around us, and that there is a power available to us to direct that sacred, holy power to transform the normal, everyday, ordinary into the holy, sacred and extraordinary. It is a conviction of that power to bring into being a thing that did not exist before, and then to take that thing and make it holy; set it aside for sacred use; bring to it a divine power that takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary.

And so, when we bless the food before we eat it, we give thanks for it – acknowledging that it is a gift of God, and then we ask that God will make it something more than just food; that it will be made into the energy of the kingdom, fueling us to do not just any work, but God’s work. Food that is so identified becomes blessed.

When Jesus blesses the bread and cup at the Last Supper, he gives thanks for it, acknowledging that all things are a gift from God, and then he blesses it, imbuing it with a sacred purpose – the nourishment of the soul as well as the body by tying it to his death and resurrection, and the new covenant, the new relationship with God his death and resurrection create for us. He ties one with the other.

*Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me...* So that, in our minds, the bread becomes Christ’s broken body and the cup becomes Christ’s shed blood. Eating the bread and drinking the cup becomes for us the taking into our bodies the body and blood of Christ. On the surface, and for those who cannot see beneath the surface, it is bread and grape juice. But with the blessing of Jesus, it attains a deeper and sacred meaning, sharing a meal with Jesus himself who offers his own body to save us. The physical becomes the spiritual through the words of blessing. So the first thing a blessing is, is the ability to set aside a thing’s or a person’s ordinariness and make them extraordinary by the power of the Holy Spirit within us.

The second thing about a blessing is the power inherent in words. Words are not just sound waves in the air that bounce from my lips to your ears. When they hit your ears, they travel to your brain, and they make your brain different. Words have incredible power to create and to transform, to build up and to tear down, to give hope or create despair.

Yesterday, right here in this sanctuary, two people said words to each other. Nothing “happened” except words. They spoke words, I witnessed them saying those words, so I said some words, “By the authority invested in me as a minister in the church of Jesus Christ, I now pronounce that Si and Debbie are husband and wife,” and it was so. Their words created a new relationship between them and my words made their words official. And their two families became one.

Just as God used words to create the world in Genesis 1, so do the words you say create a world – criticism and negative words create one kind of world; encouragement and positive words create another. As the book of James says, you can bless or you can curse; you can create a loving world or a cold, uncaring world.

You can identify the holy and sacred around you, and name it, and you have blessed it with meaning. We not only name our new baby, but with that name we create a person. And then we spend a lifetime either using words of criticism and negativity to tear that person down, or words of instruction, love, and encouragement to build that person up into someone who can then bless others.

Words have the power to reconcile or alienate. I'm sorry...I forgive you.

Words have the power to make life easier or harder. You can do this. You'll never amount to anything. You are the most precious gift in my life or I wish you'd never been born. One is a blessing, the other is a curse. One builds up while the other tears down. One makes life easier, the other makes life harder. Words have power.

But blessing someone is not just with words. We bless someone when we identify them as a unique child of God and treat them as such. Feeding a hungry person identifies them as a person of worth and value, a child of God, a sister or brother of Jesus, worthy of love and of the basics of life. Any act of helping another person is an act of blessing them – because they, too, are a sibling of Jesus.

In Matthew 25, the story of the separating of the sheep and the goats, Jesus helps us to see the sacred value of those we normally think are unimportant and not worth our time by saying that they are just the opposite. *“As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”* Because they do not have what we have does not make them less important – we are to see them as Jesus ...in the same way Jesus told us to see the bread and cup as his body and blood. If that makes the bread and cup holy, then so do the least of these become holy because they are his brothers and sisters and what we do or fail to do for them is like doing or failing to do for Jesus.

So, first, a blessing recognizes that there is the presence of more in this world than what we can see, and it identifies the sacredness, the holiness of what we might otherwise see as ordinary. Second, a blessing recognizes the power of words to create a world of reality in which the people around us can be blessed by our identifying them as children of God, a little lower than the angels, sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, and, therefore, inherently precious.

But what about blessing God? How do we bless the Lord? Certainly our words don't create anything in God. The Hebrew word we translate as bless throughout the Old Testament means to kneel, to bow down before. In Middle Eastern culture, kneeling in front of someone means acknowledging that they are more highly honored, more powerful, higher up on the social ladder. To bless God is to fall to our knees and acknowledge that we are not worthy to stand before this being, because to stand before means we are equal to God. We bow our heads when we pray to acknowledge that we are not equal to, not worthy of being in God's presence.

To bless God is to acknowledge that God is God and we are not; to acknowledge that God is the source of all good gifts and the giver of life itself. God is the one *who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*

It is to kneel before our maker and give thanks for God's blessing us. It is to forget not his benefits, to remember and be grateful and give God the credit for the blessings in our lives. To live for God because God's son has died for us.

Finally, we must remember that God has blessed us because God loves us, but God has also blessed us so that we can share God's love with people everywhere. If being blessed does not result in our passing that blessing along to others, we have not truly blessed or thanked God.

We are loved to love others. We are called to then call others to be disciples. We are blessed to be a blessing.