

“May” Day

Dorothy Boulton

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2023

Scripture

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Numbers 6:22-26

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: Thus you shall bless the Israelites. You shall say to them:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Sermon

“I feel like I’ve been blessed.” Those were the words of someone who was here for Lee Van Koten’s memorial service yesterday. They said this to me in fellowship hall after the service:

“I feel like I’ve been blessed.”

Those words brought me joy. And I was enthusiastic in telling him that that’s what we were going to be sharing, what we’ll be doing, during worship this morning: blessings. Offering blessings.

In her book, *Circle of Grace*, Jan Richardson describes the beauty and mystery of blessing, an ancient literary form. She writes, “A blessing is a distinctive constellation of words designed to call up and convey God’s deepest desire for our wholeness and well-being, both individually and in community.” (p. xiv)

With a description like that, you can understand, perhaps, why I was so delighted in this man’s experience during worship.

“Blessings,” Richardson continues, “enable us to perceive the ways the sacred inhabits the ordinary, impressing upon us that every moment and each place lies within the circle of God’s care.” They are words, she says, that “awaken us to how the holy is at work in our very midst.”

If you are familiar with Celtic blessings, you may know that they were very good at this. They had blessings for just about everything, from getting dressed to milking the cow. (*Celtic Blessings: Prayers for Everyday Life*, compiled by Ray Simpson.) There's a lovely blessing of a new garden, for example, that when I read it, I think of our amazing woodlands outside:

*There is no plant in the ground
That does not tell of your beauty, Lord.
May this garden speak to us of the fragrance of your love.
May the fruits of the earth speak to us of your mercy.
Bless the moon that is above us;
The earth that is beneath us;
The hard work to be done here
The seedlings that shall grow here;
The neighbors we shall greet here;
And all who overlook here.*

(Celtic Blessings, "Gardens", p. 113)

Words of blessing abound throughout scripture --- God's blessing to Abraham in Genesis: "I will bless you, and will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven"; in the lyricism of the Psalms: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God's holy name" (103:1), and the one we read today -- the priestly blessing given by Aaron. "May the Lord bless you and keep you, May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, May the Lord lift the light of God's countenance upon you and give you peace." If you have been present at a baptism here at CPC, you may have heard those very words spoken by a pastor to an infant, child, a teen, an adult who has just passed through the waters. And they were spoken yesterday -- the benediction at the close of Lee's service.

The words of that blessing are poetic and profound. They convey God's good intentions for human life, they offer God's protection and security, they promise that God is faithful. God's face will never turn away, God's presence will "shine" and "be gracious." God will always temper judgment with mercy. God will provide fullness of life...and shalom, peace.

I read, by the way, that Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Mr. Spock in the original Star Trek series, based the hand gesture of the Vulcan greeting on the actions of the "kohen," the men of the Orthodox Jewish congregation who would, once a year, place their prayer shawls over their heads, raise their hands, as they said this blessing upon the people.

Blessings are, in their own way, a mystical experience. Though the power of blessing, Richardson reminds us, has nothing "inherently magical." It is, however, a "channel of the Divine, a profound means of grace that has the capacity to open our eyes so that we might recognize and receive the help of the One who created us in love and whose deepest desire for us is that we be whole." A good blessing, she says, "shimmers with the mystery that lies at the heart of God." "A blessing speaks from God's mysterious heart into our own heart, meeting us in our ache for connection and presence." (p. xv)

In our gospel text in Luke, we heard Jesus' last words to his disciples, and his final loving act towards them is to give them a blessing. Though the words of the text are words of loss, of farewell, "he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven," still they knew themselves to be blessed. And so they respond with worship, with joy. They return to the temple, continually blessing God.

Christ's blessing is an outpouring of grace to those he loved. Though he is leaving them, he shares with them this deep and powerful connection, a reminder and a promise that God's goodness and favor will always be with them. It is an act of tenderness. A true gift of compassion. A sign of a relationship that will continue, and will not be ended – but passed on: God to humankind, human to human, human to God. A circle of grace indeed.

I love these words of Jan Richardson's: "Circle becomes spiral, bearing us deeper and deeper into the heart of God." (p. xix)

I imagine Jesus' friends felt that divine love and power and presence as Jesus blessed them.

Jan Richardson wrote a blessing describing that moment:

*In the leaving,
in the letting go,
let there be this
to hold onto
at the last:
the enduring of love,
the persisting of hope,
the remembering of joy,
the offering of gratitude,
the receiving of grace,
the blessing of peace.*

Our world needs more blessings. To me, this practice of blessing – of acknowledging sacred presence and holy relationship -- is the very opposite of the fear and anxiety that permeates our society. We live in a world that practices the opposite of blessing! For example, we are all still appalled and traumatized, having heard of a young man, a young Black man, Ralph Yarl, who was shot and wounded when he simply went up to the wrong house when he was picking up his siblings. To bless is to acknowledge our connections with one another, with God, with empathy and compassion. It is not to hurt or to destroy. Imagine if that man had met this young person at the door with a blessing, instead of a gun.

I think we could try getting in the habit of blessing. I have always admired the weekly sabbath practice of our Jewish siblings. On a Friday night, a family will gather around a table. There is blessing of the light. Prayers for the meal begin with the Hebrew words: *Baruch atah Adonai* (Blessed are you, O God...) And my favorite blessing, is the parents' blessing of their children. They use the words from today's text: "May God bless you and guard you, May the light of God shine upon you, may God be gracious to you. May the presence of God be with you and give you peace." That blessing is a sign of relationship, beloved relationship, unbreakable, sacred, holy, everlasting. The blessing from God, the blessing of one another, the blessing to God. Again, a circle of grace.

I feel that grace, that mystery of deep connection, during the benediction at the close of the worship service. In that blessing, I experience God's goodness, God's connection and presence. In it I sense God's desire for me to be loved and well and whole and at peace. For all other prayers, I usually put my head down. But for that blessing, I look up. It's like feeling the warm sun in the cool of winter. It's as if the gentle hands of God cradle my face, and I feel that God sees me and says to me, "I'm here. I always will be here. As you go from this place, know that I love you and I go with you."

I've called this message "May" Day because I am inviting us to participate in blessing, to practice blessing, to help it become part of who we are, who we know God is, and how we are called to see one another...as blessed children of God.

On page 12 of your bulletin, you will see a page that has a beautiful border on the top left, with the word "May." It says "May" because blessings often begin like this:

*May the Lord bless you and keep you..
May the road rise to meet you...
May God be merciful to you...
May you know Christ's peace and presence...*

I invite us to take a few moments to offer a blessing. You may want to use the word "May" as your starting point, using it to write your own blessing. You may wish to offer a blessing for someone who you know needs to feel the presence of God. Since we will be shortly installing a new deacon, perhaps offering a blessing for the officers of this congregation. Perhaps you are feeling that you need a blessing for yourself.... One way to do this would be to read the blessing on page 4 and interchange the word "you" to "me."

So... maybe take a moment to write. Or, feel welcome to draw a picture. Or even, simply place your hand on the page in a sign of that blessing.

We'll take a few short moments for this... about two minutes.

At the close we'll share together a song from Taizé, Hymn 544, and we'll sing it three times:
Bless the Lord my soul, and bless God's holy name.

May this be a time... may it be a thin place... a moment for the mystery and peace and grace of blessing.



Sources

Circle of Grace, Jan Richardson, 2015, Wanton Gospeller Press, Orlando, Florida

Celtic Blessings: Prayers for Everyday Life, compiled by Ray Simpson, 1999, Loyola Press, Chicago, IL