



Blessed to be a Blessing¹

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church on Consecration Sunday
"Bless": Genesis 12:1-4, Matthew 25:31-40*

For a long time, I have been steeped in the culture and values of recovery. Although I myself am not an addict, my life has been intimately impacted by addiction in many ways. My husband Jeff is very open about the fact that he has been sober and in recovery for over 30 years, and for many years he has also been an addiction counselor. Before I married Jeff I dated other addicts. Some of my best friends are alcoholics, and others in my extended family have struggled with substance abuse. Addiction, and recovery from addiction, is in the air I breathe and the ocean I swim in. And so as I've learned over time, since addiction is a family disease, and a disease of the mind, I have discovered I also need recovery. The paradox of recovery is that to begin to recover, you have to admit you can't make that happen yourself—either in your own life or in the life of another.

I remember once, long ago, I was dating an alcoholic. I was twenty-three. My own life had become unhealthy. Those of you who have lived with an active addict will know what this can be like. I remember reading a book by a wonderful woman named Melody Beattie, called *Codependent No More*, in which she shared about her own experience of loving alcoholics. Through her story, I finally realized that not a thing I could

¹ Genesis 12:1-4.

do would change the alcoholic's behavior, that I had already tried everything I knew how to try, and that truly the only thing I could do would be to take care of myself. Pretty soon after that I called my parents and told them I was in trouble. They came and got me, and I began the long journey of healing.

Other people's well-meaning advice had gotten me nowhere. It was Melody Beattie's *experience*, her story, that helped me recognize my own. I could receive help from someone who had been there and had gotten out, not from someone who didn't understand what I was going through.

I'm sharing all this with you because I think this kind of experience is at the heart of what is meant by the Christian practice called "bless." This fall, we've been exploring the seven practices of the Way of Jesus. These are spiritual practices that form the heart of garden variety Christian faith. Some of the practices are about connecting with God and being nourished and healed ourselves. But this practice, "bless", is about the way we are oriented in the world. It is HOW we are meant to live into Jesus' commandment to love one another. We could have picked many words here—serve, or give, or do justice, or something like that. But the word that best captures the distinctly Christian commandment to love is the word "bless."

Blessing is first and foremost about sharing with others what we have ourselves already received from God when we were in need. It's about coming from a place of gratitude and humility and awe. Some of you might remember that one of the foundational stories in the Bible is about God calling 75 year old Abraham—Abraham who had no children and

no capacity to have children. God told Abraham that God would bless him, and grant him something overtly impossible, which was as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. God said that not only would God bless Abraham, but that through Abraham all the world would be blessed. God blessed Abraham in his place of need, the place he could not fix for himself, so that he could become a blessing for others.

If you go even further back in scripture, when God creates the world, the very first thing that God blesses are the great sea monsters, the creatures of the ocean and the birds of the air. The word bless in Hebrews means to bow, to show great respect. This is the posture that God took, first of all toward whales, of all things. And this is the posture God asks us to take toward others.

In the gospel text for today Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms that those who follow him will be recognized, not by what they say, but by how they act toward the people whom he calls “the least of these who are members of my family.” He specifically names the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the naked, and those in prison, as the people who are “the least of these who are members of my family.” Both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament there is an emphasis on God’s concern for the poor, on those who have the least by this world’s standards. But here is what I think is so important. The word we are given, for how we are to treat them, is the word bless. The word bless carries with it the connotations of deep respect and even awe. The word bless carries with it the connotations of having been in need ourselves and having been blessed by God first. In Deuteronomy God teaches the Israelites to welcome the stranger because the people of Israel were once

strangers. “My father was a wandering Aramean,” begins once of the most sacred scriptures in Judaism.

We must care for the “least of these” because in our collective memory we have been there and God met us and cared for us through others. We must care for others not out of what Robert Lupton would call “toxic charity”²—a charity that assumes we are always the benefactors, always on the giving end of transactions like these—but from a place of kinship, because through our stories we remember what it’s like to be there. We must bless those who are innocent and those who are guilty, because of course the line between innocence and guilt runs straight through each one of us.

We can become people of blessing best when we are in touch with our own vulnerabilities and needs and even failures, and the way God shows up for us in them. People in recovery don’t give advice. Instead, they share what they call their “experience, strength and hope.” They share what it was like when they were stuck, and then how God helped them get unstuck. We as Christians can look at the people in need in our country and bless them by first and foremost recognizing our kinship with them.

It would be hard to imagine a group of people who more exactly fit Jesus’ definition of “the least of these who are members of my family” than the immigrants who have fled violence and poverty and war in our world. In this country, those of us of European descent came here as immigrants, most of us not from a place of riches and power, but from

² See Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, and How to Reverse It* (Harper One, 2011).

the need for a new life, with very little. Those of us of African descent were kidnapped and enslaved and oppressed for centuries. We know what it's like to come here with nothing. For those of us who now have something, we are called simply to share it. It's the first thing you learn in kindergarten. We share because we are family, because God finds a way to bless us when we are in need. We share from a place of kinship and deep respect and gratitude. We share because we know that all of us are made in the image of God and that we are all meant to be generative and connected in the fabric of human community.

Today is Consecration Sunday, and it's the day people are invited to share their financial pledge to St. John's so that we can continue to be nurtured spiritually to live Jesus' Way of Love in the world. It's also two days before the people of the Episcopal Church, along with the Minnesota Council of Churches and the Interfaith Council on Immigration, will be launching a campaign called "What Would Whipple Do?" to oppose ICE's presence in the Whipple Federal Building at Ft. Snelling and to demand that Minnesota become a sanctuary state that does not cooperate with ICE. To get more information about participating in this campaign please speak with our deacon Rex McKee. Those are two simple ways you can engage the practice we call "bless."

More deeply, though, I'd like to invite each of you to take some time this week to get in touch with your own story of blessing. When in your life has God met you in your place of greatest need that you could not fix? How is God calling you to share your blessing with others—especially those Jesus calls "the least of these, who are members of my family"?

Let us join the endless cycle of God's abundant blessing. Let us learn to recognize the goodness in each person and respect and bless it. Let us accept God's help and blessing precisely where we have run out of resources. Let us not wait a single day to bless the least of these who are members of Christ's family. Let us become people of blessing. **Amen.**