

Word of God: speak to us. Speak through us. Amen.

What is the first prayer most children learn, besides saying grace at meals?
It's Bless. "God bless mommy, God bless, Daddy, God bless sissy, God bless
the dog, the cat, grandma..." and on it goes. A list of blesses.

"Bless you!" most Americans say when someone sneezes.

We bless meals, we bless pets, we bless people,

We bless the bread and wine that become for us Christ's body and blood.
But do we really know what a powerful gift we let pass through our hands?

Do we know that blessing is not something we ask for or offer, but stand in,
like someone standing in a stream?

We are standing in a stream – a stream of blessing that originates
at the throne of God and empties out into the whole wide world.

We don't need to look for blessing – to look for blessing is like a fish looking
for water. We're just in it. We don't need to pray for blessing.

We just need to become aware of it and activate it.

If what we claim about God is true – that God is love, that God creates,
that God gives, that God forgives, that God is merciful – then we know this:
God is in the business of blessing. Blessing is God's nature.

And here's the thing when we cultivate the spiritual practice of Bless:
it becomes our nature too. Our second nature.

The first step in cultivating Bless as a practice is to wire ourselves to
expect blessing. I've told the story of receiving that word when my beloved cat
was sick and I was praying, "Please, please, please" – "Expect blessing."

There is always blessing if we can tune ourselves to see it.

We don't get to specify, and sometimes it's in an area other than where
we crave it, but we can expect blessing.

Reorienting myself to expect blessing revolutionized the way I respond to fear,
the way I think of God's activity. And the way I pray.

Prayer is not about our trying to get God to change something –
At its best, prayer is putting ourselves in the space where God can change us,
inviting God to change our orientation, open our awareness.

Nowadays I sometimes still pray, “please, please, please,” but more often it’s,
“God, release your blessing, release your healing; your forgiveness.
Show me the obstacles and help me take them down.”
That’s how blessing becomes our second nature.

We are also called to speak blessing, using our words to make whole, passing
along God’s blessing by the way we speak to ourselves, and to others.
We all know of the damage critical or abusive words can do – a child told
she is stupid will think she is, or careless will grow up that way.
Words of affirmation have similar power to build up, to make people more than
they thought they could be. Can you remember a time someone spoke life to
you by the way they described you, or qualities they saw in you, or affirmed you?
Who around you needs the blessing of your words?

We are called to be people of blessing in our actions. To bless is an active thing.
Jesus told this story when a lawyer asked him one day how to inherit eternal life.
After ascertaining that the man knew not only the rules, but the heart of the law,
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength,
and love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus said, “You’re fine!”
But the man wasn’t satisfied... maybe he was looking for a loophole?
He asked, “Then who is my neighbor?”

And Jesus told a story about a man being beaten and robbed on a dangerous road
– just saying, “A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho”
would have gotten a reaction from his listeners;
That road was notorious for bandits and robbers and worse.
The man is set upon, and left beaten, half-dead. Two men come by, both clergy,
and do not stop. No doubt they had important religious work to do.
Maybe they couldn’t risk defilement if the man was dead.
Maybe they’re afraid of being attacked themselves if they stop.
The one who stops is a Samaritan – to that audience, a less than desirable ethnicity.
Just think of the kind of person you fear and loathe most in America right now
– put that person in the story.
He stops and checks, finds the man still alive, uses his own resources – oil and
wine – to clean his wounds, puts him on his own mule, which slows him down
and puts him at greater risk – and gets him to an inn, where he cares for him.
When he needs to go, he leaves resources to cover the man’s care until he is
fully well. He is compassionate, organized and thorough.

Jesus says that the neighbor in that story is not the man beaten and robbed;
it is the Samaritan, the outcast, of whom they thought the worst things.
He is the neighbor. He is the agent of blessing, not the religious leaders
who passed by before.
He gave of his resources, he took great risks, and he saw the need through.

In the past year, one of our members has endured a level of adversity and
hardship that would leave most people like that person lying on the Jericho road.
I want her to tell her story of how, in the midst of all that un-blessing,
she was blessed through these two congregations.
*Alicia's story of being cared for by this church community emotionally, spiritually
and financially in a year of cancer, foot surgeries, pandemic and job loss.*

That is how we are to be agents of blessing –
Aware of how we are swimming in blessing, we bless –
We give beyond what we think we can - here, and to strangers;
We work for healing and restoration of people and nations;
We are organized, compassionate and thorough.
I can't think of a greater need in our country right now, than people who see their
primary ministry as being vehicles for God's constant blessing.

We are to live expecting blessing to fill and surround us,
no matter where we find it.
We are to offer blessing by our actions and in our generous giving.
We are to speak people into wholeness with our words.
And we are to simply be the blessing God is releasing into this world.

Amen.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'