

Blessing

Tenth in a series of Ten Sermons: A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

August 30, 2020

13th Sunday After Pentecost

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**Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!
Lift up your hands to the holy place
and bless the Lord!
May the Lord bless you from Zion,
he who made heaven and earth!**

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the first 9 weeks of this sermon series, we have explored the topics of pilgrimage, repentance, providence, worship, servanthood, joy, work, perseverance, community, and today - blessing.

The rhythm of Christianity is that God blesses us, and in response we bless Him. In the case of the pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem, God had guided and watched over them, and they had reached their destination safely. The way of discipleship that began in Psalm 120 with an act of repentance now concludes in Psalm 134 with a life of praise. It's pretty easy to summarize this Psalm - "bless God, bless God, God bless you."

In Psalm 1, the blessed man of God is compared to a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, its leaf never withers, in all that he does, he prospers. Here the word for "blessed" means having it all together. It is that sense of well-being that comes when you have accomplished a major goal, that satisfaction which comes with getting that academic degree or that job promotion, that sigh of relief when the house is paid for or the much-planned journey is successfully completed. And so, for Christians who have the peace that only Jesus can give, life is wonderful. It's trouble free. Absolutely no feelings of sadness, no feelings of anger, no feelings of fear. For Christians, life is a walk in the park. Right?

Wrong! As Lynn Anderson would say, "I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden. Along with the sunshine, there's gotta be a little rain sometime!"

In today's sermon, my premise is that there are at least two ways to life. One way is to let human feelings and emotion run the show, and the second way is for the blessings of God to be in charge.

Two undeniable truths in our sermon today.

- **Undeniable truth #1 is that in certain chapters of life, the curse of sin feels overwhelming.**
- **Undeniable truth #2 is that in every chapter of life, the blessings of God come to the rescue.**

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Undeniable truth #1 is that in certain chapters of life, the curse of sin feels overwhelming. The year 2020 has been anything but a walk in the park. Start out with the covid-19 stay at home orders and the shut-down of restaurants and businesses and add to that ventilator shortages and death totals in the hundreds of thousands worldwide, and add to that schools shutting down and then a mask mandate, and families and lifelong friendships getting harmed by all of the controversy, and you have a chapter of life where the curse of sin feels overwhelming.

Add to that election year politics where millions of people feel as though Donald Trump is the worst president ever and millions of others feel as though he is the best thing since sliced bread and millions of others think all politicians are a bunch of crooks, and you have a chapter of life where the curse of sin feels overwhelming.

Add to that the death of George Floyd leading to protesting and then rioting and burning and looting and crime sprees that seem to go on and on in Minneapolis and Chicago and Portland and Seattle and dozens of other cities, and then you hear about a shooting in Kenosha and a whole new rash of rioting and burning and looting and shooting, and you say to yourself, here we go again and when will it all end and what's this world coming to? One more chapter of life where the curse of sin feels overwhelming.

In our Epistle lesson today, Jude the brother of James predicted it, **“In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions. It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.**

Speaking about following our own ungodly passions, a story is told about a son who didn't want to get out of bed and he didn't feel like going to church. His mom kept telling him to get up and go, but he kept on telling her he didn't want to. Finally, she asked, “Why don't you want to go to church, son?” To which he answered, “Well I just don't feel like it, I'm tired, and besides that, the people over there don't like me and some of them are downright mean to me....give me one good reason why I should go to church, Mom! To which she replied, “I'll give you two good reasons. 1) You're 40 years old, and 2) You're the pastor! (Even pastors fall into the trap of letting human feelings run the show.)

In his book, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” Eugene Peterson makes the point that for the people of God, feelings don't run the show. He suggests that even if you don't feel like going to church and praising God, do it anyway, and as you spend some time blessing God, you just might feel more like blessing Him. To folks who don't feel like going to church, the command of God is to do it anyway, and as you spend time listening to God's Word, the blessings of the Holy Spirit will be sweeping over your soul in invisible fashion.

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Which brings us to **Undeniable truth #2 is that in every chapter of life, the blessings of God come to the rescue.**

As a way of illustrating how the blessings of God have a way of coming to the rescue and helping us to endure the difficult chapters of life, I'd like to tell you about a man who is one of my best friends. He's one of my best friends, even though I don't know his name or anything about his personal life. All that I know is that he comes every Wednesday morning in his big green truck and he takes away my garbage. Every Wednesday, he takes away my smelly and disgusting garbage that may well include dog feces and dead mice and he takes it away and he never ever brings it back again. He never brings it back and throws it on my lawn. And that's why he's one of my best friends. The garbage bill is one I always pay in plenty of time. Thank God for the taking away of garbage!

So also, do we consider Jesus Christ to be our best friend. He's the one who paid the bill at the cross, the bill we could never begin to pay on our own. He is the one who came to rescue not only 2000 years ago on a little hill outside of Jerusalem. He comes to the rescue in every chapter of life with his gifts of grace, mercy and truth. He comes to the rescue in the means of grace. He comes to rescue as often as we hear the preaching and teaching of God's Word. He comes to the rescue as often as we receive his very body and blood at the table. He comes to the rescue in every chapter of life as often as we rest in his promises of forgiveness.

Carl Henry has written a book on this matter of God coming to the rescue with a title that includes the phrase, "The God Who Stands, Stoops, and Stays.

This is the posture of God as he blesses us. He stands, He stoops, and He stays.

God stands with us as the Maker of Heaven and earth, to whom we may run again and again for refuge and strength. He stands among us as all-knowing and all powerful and all caring, giving us every reason in the world to fear and to love and to trust in him above all things. He stands in a way that is foundational and dependable and unshakeable, and so it happens again and again that the blessings of God melt away the fears and the frustrations and the failures threatening to overwhelm. Instead of withering away under pressure, we stand in God's grace, we bless others with the faith that has been worked inside of us, the Name of God is kept holy, and the kingdom of God comes more and more in our midst.

Secondly, God stoops, He gets down on His knees among us, He comes down from heaven above in the Person of Jesus Christ, He lives among us in the flesh for a time, He gets on our level, and He shares Himself with us. He does not reside afar off and send us an occasional letter of encouragement; he kneels among us. This is the Good News that is meant to calm us down in the midst of unsettling times. Jesus would look you in the eyes today and say, If

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God spared not His only Son, will He not also graciously give you all good things? If not, a single sparrow falls to the ground without the permission of your Father in heaven, why would we permit our feelings to run the show of our life? Instead, we get down on our knees and we serve God by helping and befriending our neighbors in every one of their needs. We spend our days thanking and praising, serving and obeying, and as we live a life of praise, our feelings get into the back seat where they belong.

God stands, He stoops, and third, He stays. He sticks with us through hard times and easy, He stays with us through thick and thin, He teaches us when storms are raging and when all is calm, He is patient with us in a way that builds us up and enables us to keep on going.

I ran across this paragraph from a book by Courtney Peppernell with the title, "Pillow Thoughts." It invites us to think about this matter of not giving up and staying in the middle of the fight. *"You can't skip chapters, that's not how life works. You have to read every line, meet every character. You won't enjoy all of it. Some chapters will make you cry for weeks. You will read things you don't want to hear; you will have moments when you don't want the pages to end. But you have to keep going."*

In her last few months of life, my dear mom wasn't sure why she was still here, she frequently couldn't remember what time of the day it was, she had all kinds of health concerns including a form of Parkinson's which meant that she took very short steps, she dragged her feet, she walked ever so slowly. On one occasion, my sister Gail and I were escorting her to the dining hall, and she was walking very slowly, and one or more times, she came to a complete stop. My sister would say, "Mom, take the next step, move your foot." Mom would repeat after Gail, "That's right, take the next step, move my feet." And so that little journey would continue.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who travel together through the ups and downs of the year 2020. They watch the news, they shake their heads, they wonder if it could get any worse, but as often as they remember that there is a mansion in heaven on reserve for them, they keep on going. There are mornings when they don't feel like getting out of bed, there are late afternoons when they feel like curling up in a ball and taking a nap, but as often as they take their tiredness and their anxieties to God in prayer, that often they find energy to keep on going. Some of them are worried sick about covid-19, others are angry as they can be about inner city violence, still others as afraid as they can be about how the election will turn out, but as often as the hand of God's blessing touches them, that often they are able to take the next step, that often they are able to move their feet, that often they are able to practice a long obedience in the same direction.