

What's a Blessing?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Matthew 5:3-10

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

from "Dear Gift of Life" by Bradford Smith

Hill and valley and still water, mountain and canyon and deep are the work of one creation; and why have I been placed in it? And what do I do in it, with such a little while before I am gone? The valley stays, and the hills I climb now, and the still waters run, and I will be laid somewhere beneath them all. Yet in time they, too, will be gathered up in some mighty motion of fire or flood or ice. Therefore all values are shadowed with death, yet they live in beauty. And the shadow, as in painting, is what gives roundness and ripeness to shapes and colors that would otherwise have little beauty at all. Death rims life with the beauty of transiency. It is because beauty is always passing – clouds moving, waters flowing, leaves scattering, youth aging – that it so pierces our hearts. The valley of life is shadowed by death, but this is my valley and I will live at peace with it.

Sermon

Over 35 years ago I first preached a sermon by this title at First Parish in Cambridge, where I was assistant minister, and then preached it some more when visiting a few other churches. In 1987 I preached it for the Search Committee of our First Parish Old Ship Church; and in 1988 I preached it for the rest of our congregation.

Well, I'm not going to preach the same sermon today, my final sermon as Old Ship's minister... though there will echoes. I am, however, going to begin with the same story with which I began this sermon all those other times all those

years ago... a story first shared with me by my Quaker father-in-law, Charlie, as I began my career as a Unitarian Universalist minister:

A fellow had been saving for years to buy the car of his dreams: a Maserati! It had all the features he wanted; it was his heart's desire.

Well, not ordinarily a particularly religious man, he nevertheless felt the need to have his precious new possession blessed. So he knocked on the door of his Catholic parish church – where he had not been for some time – and asked the priest if he would give his Maserati a blessing. “What’s a Maserati?” the priest replied. When told about this fancy sport car, the priest said that such a blatantly materialistic object was simply not the sort of thing he could bless.

Disappointed, but undaunted, the man continued down the street and knocked at the door of several Protestant churches – same response. And at the Jewish temple too, the Rabbi asked “What’s a Maserati?” and when he was told, he replied that there was nothing in the Torah or Talmud about such things – he could not give a blessing to a Maserati.

Finally, and almost ready to give up, the man saw one last church: First Parish Unitarian Universalist. He wasn't sure what sort of church this was, but he figured it might be worth a try. He knocked. The minister came to the door. The man asked his question, expecting yet another rejection: “Would you give my Maserati a blessing?”

The Unitarian Universalist minister replied: “Very cool car! But... what’s a blessing?”

Well... it’s an old story, and plays into old stereotypes about Unitarian Universalists: For example, that we might be more likely to be knowledgeable about so-called worldly matters – sport cars for example – than about spiritual matters.

These days, though, I like to think that the UU minister in the story was trying to wake this guy up, to challenge him, as if to say: Okay, you know all about this car of yours, this Maserati, but do you even know what you’re talking about when you ask for a blessing? Maybe my UU colleague was hoping that he could get a conversation going about things that matter more than a fancy car. To get this fellow to re-examine his priorities in life.

So... just what is a blessing? What do you think? After all, for my benediction each week I often say something like: “Aware of the blessings in our lives, may we turn and make of our lives a blessing to others, a blessing to life.”

What am I talking about?

What was Jesus talking about (or his translators) when he affirmed that “Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn, the peacemakers...” and so on?

Well, evocatively, the English word “blessing” traces its meaning to a Teutonic word originally meaning “to mark with blood, to consecrate; therefore, to make sacred or holy with blood.”

Whoa!

And though it may or may not be related etymologically, the French word “blesser” means “to wound.”

Well... these derivations add depth, don’t you think, to our more ordinary (and perfectly fine) uses of the word, when we talk about counting our blessings: enough food to eat, a roof over our heads, friends, family, a beautiful day, and so on. Yet, as Cynthia Ozick once wrote: “The ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful, so we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude.” The blessings of our lives.

But blessing as marking with blood, blessing as a wound? What could that possibly be about?

This gets us to the reading from Bradford Smith – who, not incidentally, was dying from cancer when he wrote those words. He so beautifully reminded us that we respond to beauty with all the more depth of spirit when we allow ourselves to remember that it is “because beauty is always passing – clouds moving, waters flowing, leaves scattering, youth aging – that it so pierces our hearts.”

“Pierces our hearts” – there’s the wound which is in some way inevitably part of the blessing.

There were, for example, moments – many moments – when our children, Sandra, Adam, and Eliza, were growing up that I would look at them (splashing in the waves, swinging on the swing, running down a field or beach) with all their childlike enthusiasm, innocence, and beauty, and tears would rise, partly because I knew they would grow up (which is wonderful of course, but also a sort of loss). Now... same deal with our wonderful grandchildren Lowell, Devitt, Arlo, and Levi. 1,000% blessing, but etched with the wound of transiency... that in fact makes their beauty pierce the heart.

Well, I could go on. In fact, 35 years ago when I preached the sermon “What’s a Blessing?” I went on probably way too long!

But I think that after these 35 years we’ve shared... or however long each of you have been listening to me, you get my point, which is about waking up to the blessings, the gifts of life... even (or maybe especially) in the midst of the tough parts of life, the really hard parts, and certainly (because this is how it is) in the midst of life’s transiency. Pay attention – to each other, to each day, to each moment, to your own soul.

I have to remind myself of this, you know, so I’m not inviting you to an exercise I don’t also sometimes – if not often – need.

Today... not surprisingly... indeed for these recent months... I’ve been trying to pay particular attention as my days with you wind down, attention to each day, each moment with you, here... and at the same time reflecting on the blessings of *all* these years together:

As I stand here... I feel the blessing once again, as I have for 35 years of leading worship in and from this extraordinary Meeting House raised by some of my ancestors... along with hundreds of weddings, child dedications, memorial services – including my mother’s – what a gift to be held by you here during our family’s grieving time.

And none of this, after all, would have been nearly the same in an empty Meeting House. So, I feel the blessing today as I have for many hundreds of times of worshipping with you, celebrating with you, mourning with you... along with the blessing of sharing conversations wherever it might be: in a class or group or social time or at times of challenge or grief for you.

And you know, it has been a blessing, too, to struggle together with hard questions about finances, or about the future of the parish house, and whatever else. Because we work these things out together – one community regardless of varying opinions about this or that. Mary Niles of blessed memory put it quite perfectly. Mary – who had been extraordinarily generous to Old Ship and dedicated to our congregation in every way – would say that when a vote was taken, whether those who shared her opinion had carried the day or not... hers was only one voice, but together we were a community... and this was still her church... and she wasn’t going anywhere. What a blessing to work together in that spirit.

Finally – what a blessing to reach out together on behalf of the well-being and the rights of all, enabling us, for example, to stand together as one as we have done this month for LGBTQ+ rights and dignity. A blessing, too, to serve a meal together at Father Bill’s Place. A blessing to raise thousands and thousands of dollars for our own Unitarian Universalist Service Committee’s human rights programs and for many other important causes.

Well... I could go on... for a long time enumerating all that has been a blessing for me as your minister during all these years.

Simply put, it has been and is a blessing – a joy! – to be with you in the midst of whatever comes, to worship, talk, struggle together, to seek to help and heal together. To simply be present with and for each other. What a beautiful thing.

Yet... as with all such blessings, this blessing too comes with the wound of eventual parting... yesterday and today we have been marking our approaching parting... joy and sorrow woven fine. Shakespeare said it: “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” And once, after leaving home following Christmas break in college, I wrote a poem which included this line: “So glad the home is sad to leave.” Sadness and gratitude interwove... as it is today.

All this said, then – I’ll finish today pretty much as I finished my “What’s a Blessing?” sermon all those years ago:

Such power, I said then and say again today, in the word “blessing.” To make sacred with blood, to wound. You have to take it all, the word tells us, you have to take it whole, drink the cup full, because it can’t be divided: Blessing, wound... life, death... meeting, parting.

What’s a blessing – really?

No easy answers – and yet the simplest of answers: Awakening. Fullness of life. Love. Kindness. Presence for and with another human being – or any creature. The answers of experience: life lived, the circle of blessings received and given, growing awareness of how life is indeed, in John Muir’s delightful phrase, “all hooked together.”

And a deepening knowledge of life as blessing, awareness of the blessing of moments, and of moments stretching into generations, may yet be enough, for each of us, and for all of us together.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.