

“Counting Our Blessings”
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Broken pots and flowers and gardens can be a wonderful way to talk about blessings and to teach our children about blessings. As Kerri Meyer, the DRE at the Unity-Unitarian Church in St. Paul, has written, “A garden may [in fact] be the very definition of the word “blessing,” no matter what definition we emphasize.

She points out that we may think of “blessing” as good fortune, for instance. We know that although we can plant seeds, we cannot make the sun shine or the rain fall. “But these things still come without our asking. They are a blessing...”

We may think of a “blessing” as something that we are glad of. As Meyer says, “There is a joy that even the youngest child recognizes in the springtime warmth of the soil, in the miraculous seed leaves that first reach to the sun, in the ripe sweetness of a just-picked tomato.”

Or we may think of “blessing” as “the conference of favor” or protection. When we take the time to plant a garden, we most certainly confer our favor upon its resident plants, offering them the protection they need from weeds and pests. We have a special relationship with our gardens and so we nurture them carefully.¹

Perhaps my favorite definition of “blessing,” though, comes from our reading this morning: “Whether it’s something we count or something we do, blessing refers to the abundance and wholeness of life,”² abundance and wholeness that are there even when we can’t see them for what seems like all the scarcity and brokenness around us.

As Karen Hering notes, there is an awful lot of brokenness in the world today. She names some specifics... “Unemployment rates rising and markets falling...[the] earth suffering...the war raging on.” I don’t know that I really believe the world is any more broken now than it was before, but those are the cracks that mar its surface today.

In a world like ours, there is no doubt, it is sometimes difficult to see blessings. And it can sometimes be a challenge to offer them, as well.

We’ve talked before about that drive to or from the grocery store, when some jerk pulls out in front of you suddenly or stops to turn without using a blinker. Do you bless or do you curse? Cathy and I have been talking about this recently: She’s afraid Katelynn’s first words are going

¹ Meyer, Kerri, “The Blessing is in the Seed,” May 2009 edition of the Community Newsletter, Unity Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.

² Hering, Karen, “Blessing,” May 2009 edition of the Community Newsletter, Unity Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.

to be “Jesus Christ!” And I’m afraid she’s going to one day turn to someone and say, “What? Is that car too big for you to drive?”

Yes, whether it’s something we count or something we do, blessing can be elusive.

When I think about the elusiveness of blessing, I think about one of my favorite characters in the Bible – Jacob – whom I’ve always loved for his realness. As a young man, Jacob was a schemer, a liar, a cheater, but he grew up to become one of the greatest ancestors in the lineage of the Jewish people. The Bible is like that...full of unlikely heroes.

Jacob had a lot of experience with blessing, but not all of it was good.

When he was a young man, still single and living at home, Jacob stole from his father Isaac the blessing meant for his brother Esau. By that time in his life, Isaac was nearly blind. So, Jacob put on Esau’s clothes, in order to smell like his brother. He covered his hands with goat skin, so he’d feel hairy like his brother. And while his brother was out hunting game, Jacob cooked a meal for his father the lazy way, using a lamb from his father’s own flock.

When Isaac asked Jacob who it was that had come to serve him the meal of game and lentils for which he had longed, Jacob lied outright and said that he was Esau. And that is how he received the blessing of his father.

Some time later, on his way out of town for fear of losing his life to his angry brother, Jacob stopped and slept and had a dream, in which God offered him a great and unexpected blessing. And when he awoke he said, “Surely God is in this place; and I did not know it!” And it is in the same way that we sometimes – even in the midst of our particular adversity – look about us and realize that our lives are more blessed than we knew or had remembered. And if we’re lucky, that feeling stays with us for a while. But all too often, it fades away and we go back to fighting for our blessings again...

Like Jacob, whom years later, when he was a bit older, a married father of 12, was on his way back home to see his brother again. He had sent his family ahead of him across the river. And it is said that Jacob stayed up all night long in the wilderness stubbornly wrestling with one of God’s angels, refusing to let go of him until the angel agreed to bless him.

I enjoy and appreciate Jacob so much because, as I said, he is so very human. Poor Jacob! His long life was actually filled with many blessings, yet still he so often believed that blessings were scarce. They weren’t easy to come by. At times he didn’t think there was enough blessing to go around. He struggled and fought for so many of the blessings he received.

And when you think about it, don’t we, too? Jacob’s life is a great metaphor for our own lives, when it comes to our relationships with blessing. Sometimes, like Jacob waking up from a dream, we see all the blessings that are in our lives that we hadn’t seen before. But all too often, at other times, it can seem to us like there isn’t enough blessing to go around now, either.

We could use a little blessing, right? And all too often many of us find ourselves struggling to attain the blessings of others. Some of us have fought to get the blessings of our parents. Many of us have fought to get the blessings of our peers. We have longed for blessing in our lives, but all too often it has seemed elusive.

Whether it is something we count or something we do, blessing can escape us. But perhaps that is not how it was meant to be...

In the creation stories of the Bible, God looked upon all of creation and said, "It is good!" And I, for one, believe that with my head even when I can't see it with my heart. That doesn't mean it's perfect, as in, without cracks or blemishes or faults. It means that it is fundamentally good, in all of its wholeness.

The problem that I sometimes have in seeing it is the result of a failure of my perception. As the Roman philosopher, Seneca, once said, "The great blessings of mankind are with us and within our reach; but we shut our eyes, and, like people in the dark, we fall foul upon the thing we search for, without finding it."

It can be so easy, instead, to focus our eyes and hearts on what is wrong, what is lacking. It can be easier to see what *we* are *not* and what *other* people are *not* than what we *are*.

Later this morning as part of our prayer before our silent meditation, I'm going to offer you the opportunity to share some of your blessings out loud. But for now I'd like to invite you to reflect for a few moments on the blessings in your own life...

If I were to give you each 100 stones and ask you to count 100 blessings in your life this morning...

Could you do it?
And mean it?
How easy would it be?
How difficult?

How much time do you spend focusing on what you lack instead of what you have?

Do you know yourselves to be blessed?

Do you see the blessings that surround you here in your homes?
In your work?
In your relationships?
Do you see the blessings that surround you here, in this religious community?

Can you see the wholeness, the goodness, the abundance? Or do you see only brokenness?

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, we are told that God spoke from on high and said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." Whether or not we believe the story or believe in a God at all, that is a message that we each need to hear. That is a blessing we each need to receive from someone. Ideally that is a blessing we received from our parents or from our grandparents or from some other adults in our lives. In fact, ideally, that is a blessing we receive over and over again throughout our lives from many sources until we come to know it to be true deep within our bones.

But in reality, it can sometimes be a challenge to see ourselves or others as beloved – or as inherently good – and to offer that blessing to others in return.

For that is really what it means to offer one's blessing to another. According to Henri Nouwen,

To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or appreciation; it is more than pointing out someone's talents or good deeds; it is more than putting someone in the light. To give a blessing is to affirm, to say 'yes' to a person's Belovedness.

How easy is it for you to see the blessedness – the goodness – in yourself?
And in those around you?

How easy or how challenging is it for you to confer your blessing on another?

It has been said, "We can bless others with a good word or a smile, a kind of action that goes completely unobserved, or simply a good wish in silence."³

When was it that you last offered your blessing to someone else?

I have to say, on this Mother's Day, that it is remarkably easy for me to look at my daughter and feel blessed and to know her to be a blessing. And it is easy to offer her my blessing, to convey to her my acknowledgment of her Belovedness. She's a good starting place for me. She is number one on my list of counted blessings. Jacob, too, as a parent, was finally able to give his blessings freely to each of his own children. I imagine that for many of us, parenthood can open us up to blessing in a new way – both the seeing of it and the doing of it. For some, it can be redemptive.

But the task before us is to expand our ability to see blessings and offer blessings. The spiritual task we face is to learn to see blessing – abundance and wholeness and goodness - all the time and everywhere; because only when we see it can we share it with others. And that, I believe is part of our calling - to become seers of blessing and sources of blessing not only for our own kids, but for the world.

Imagine what a gift it would be to the world – to one another – to be able to say, "I see goodness in you!" I recognize the abundance that is here!"

³ David Steindl-Rast in *The Music of Silence*.

But in order to do that, in order to convey our sense of wholeness and goodness and abundance to others, we first have to practice seeing them. We can start by making a spiritual practice of counting our blessings.

Did you know that there have been scientific studies done on the effects of blessing counting? Dr. Robert Emmons and his colleague Michael McCullough did research a few years ago using three groups of college students.

The first group of students was asked to make a list of five things that had happened in the previous week for which they were grateful. They did this for 10 consecutive weeks. The second group was asked to make a list of five hassles from the previous week. And the third group made lists of events that had occurred, without focusing on either the positive or the negative aspects of those events.

The students also kept daily journals to record their attitudes, moods and health.

What the researchers learned was that those in the first group felt 25% happier than the others. They were more optimistic, they were generally healthier, they exercised more, and they felt better overall.

Counting blessings is good for us! And, I would imagine, for those with whom we're in relationship!

But as someone once said, "We should certainly count our blessings, but we should also make our blessings count."⁴

The question is not only how will it change our own lives to count our blessings, not only how will it transform us, but how will we, in turn, transform the world when we see how blessed we are?

I'll leave you for now with a poem by Rebecca Parker, the president of the Starr-King School for the Ministry, who writes:

Your gifts
whatever you discover them to be
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice

⁴ Neil Maxwell

or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door
hoard bread,
abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice
or withhold love.
You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world

So may it be for us.
Amen and Blessed be.