

We Are Blessed

Isaiah 42:1-9 Matthew 3:13-17

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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Jim Wallis is the editor of Sojourner Magazine and the pastor of a religious community in Washington D.C. He has lived and worked among poor people most of his life. He is used to walking in areas that are described as "unsafe." About 10 years ago I heard him recount a harrowing experience. He heard the sound of running feet. He felt a hard blow to the side of his head and he fell to the ground. He heard a young voice yell, "get his money and let's get out of here." Realizing the he was experiencing his first genuine mugging, Mr. Wallis was able to scramble to his feet and face his assailants. They were children - two who were perhaps 15 or 16, and one who could not have been older than 13. The youngest was practicing the karate kicks in the air that he must have seen on television shows. Jim was surprised to see that they had no weapons. His response to them was emotional, without thought. "Just stop it," he heard himself yelling at them. "Just get out of here." Jim is not a big man. He is dedicated to non-violence. But again, coming from someplace inside him were words he did not expect. "I am a pastor," he said. "Are you going to come and see what you can get out of this pastor?"

He was surprised again when they turned and ran away. Then the youngest one turned back and said words he would never forget. "Pastor! Pastor! Pray and ask God to give me a blessing."

That child, who learned his karate moves from TV and was learning the ways of the streets from his friends, knew a profound spiritual truth. He knew that he needed a blessing. He knew that he needed something from God in order to get through life.

We are blessed. And if we do not feel blessed, perhaps all we need to do is stop running away from God and allow ourselves to be embraced.

During this season of Epiphany we have begun to explore what Henri Nouwen calls, "The Life of the Beloved." We noted last week that this life is seen in the fourfold action of Holy Communion, when the celebrant takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it. Jesus is chosen, blessed, broken and given. We are chosen. We are blessed. We are broken. We are given.

Last week we claimed our chosenness as God's children. We claimed our chosenness by unmasking the ways that the world would hide our true identity, connecting with the word of truth that has been revealed in scripture, and celebrating who we are and whose we are. Our blessedness is an extension of our chosenness. To claim our chosenness is to acknowledge God's intention from the beginning of all things to take us in hand, to embrace us with love, to intend abundant life for us. Nouwen writes that beyond being chosen, "we also need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by love on every step of our lives."¹

Nouwen goes on to say that our blessedness is an antidote to our moodiness. "One day we feel great, the next we feel miserable. One day we are full of new ideas, the next everything looks bleak and dull. One day we think we can take on the whole world, but

the next even a little request seems too much for us. These mood swings show that we no longer hear the blessing that was heard by Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Jesus of Nazareth and that we, too, are to hear. When we are thrown up and down by the little waves on the surface of our existence, we become easy victims of our manipulative world, but, when we continue to hear the deep gentle voice that blesses us, we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging.^{”ii}

At your baptism your most important attribute was proclaimed publicly: you are God's child. It was true even before you were baptized. The service of baptism was a sacramental, public acting out of an existing reality. After our baptisms we have the daily opportunity to claim that reality for ourselves.

What if every time during the day that we encountered water we remembered our baptism?

It is like early in the morning when the alarm goes off. One struggles out of a warm bed and gropes into the bathroom. There's the noise of water running, throwing water in the face to wake up.

Early every morning - life renewed by washing, a resurrection of the dead by running water. H2O. The liquid of life - teeth brushed and mouth rinsed, eyes washed, patted dry, neck and face rubbed with wet, hot washcloth, lingering for a moment on the skin on a cold and early morning.

Every morning there is daily resurrection and renewal.

After Jesus was baptized in the river, "just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God come down to land on him, and a voice from heaven: 'This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

What would life be, if that were said to us? What would our lives be like, if each morning just as we finished our showers the heavens opened and we all remembered we, too, are baptized?

What would happen if before any of us leave the house we look at that water on our hands or in the sink or whirlpooling down the drain -- and hear again the words, "This is my son, this is my daughter. I love you."

What would happen in our communities, in our corporations, in government if when finishing our showers and stepping out, dripping, every Christian would remember we are born again, new, day by day? Not that we **were** baptized, but that we **are** baptized.

Looking up to see your face in the mirror as you dry it off with the towel, by the recollection of the water you know that the Spirit of God keeps descending on you. You are a child of God. You hear the poet's words:

"You are my own dear child, You have my heart beguiled,

I'm pleased with you.

My love will never end, My strength I'll always lend,

My blessings ever send, Your whole life through!"

At our baptism we acknowledge our chosenness as children of God. To remember our baptism each day is to continually experience the blessing of God.

Henri Nouwen lists two other ways that we hear and claim God's blessing of our lives: Prayer and Presence.

Cultivate in your life of prayer the art of listening. Nouwen, who has thought and written much about prayer, relates his personal experience: “Although I have a tendency to say many things to God, the real ‘work’ of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me.” This is not being self-indulgent, but rather is the hard discipline of prayer. We are used to a world filled with the noise of negative messages. Our constant talking is often our sub-conscious effort to deflect what we don’t want to hear. But the true gift of being silently present with God is to reach beyond the negative noise in the world and hear the intimate voice that would say to us again and again, “You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.”

The second way Nouwen tells us to claim blessing in our lives is by the cultivation of presence, that is, being attentive to the day-to-day blessings in our lives. This might include what I spoke of before of using water as a reminder of God’s grace in our lives, but expanding that to see how we are blessed by the poor person that stops us on the sidewalk, blessed by the flowers that bloom, the music, art and architecture that inspires – and most of all the blessings we receive as words of encouragement and love that come to us from others. These things surround us, but our attentiveness to them is a choice. Practicing presence means setting aside our pre-occupations, our pressing agendas, our rush from place to place and allowing God to bless us through the interruptions. Pay attention to that which you did not expect to happen on this day in order to receive the blessing that comes as a gift.

I share with you a final thought and an opportunity to share a blessing. The final thought I share with you today is that we are blessed to be a blessing. Nouwen writes, “Perhaps the fact that few people offer a real blessing is the sad result of the absence of people who are willing and able to receive such a blessing.”ⁱⁱⁱ And later he notes: “Claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others.”^{iv}

The opportunity to share a blessing happens at our local City Council meeting tomorrow evening. Individuals and families that are homeless do not often receive words of blessing. More often they hear words of rejection, fear, or apathy. A decade ago, Santa Monica First United Methodist Church created Upward Bound House for families in their quiet neighborhood. Because of this ministry, hundreds of families with children have transitioned from homelessness to permanent, self-reliant housing. We thankful that this program is able to expand through a planned emergency family shelter at a former motel on W. Washington Blvd. in Culver City. Strong support from the community and many Culver-Palms UMC and interfaith supporters helped convince the Planning Commission to move forward with this application. That decision has been appealed to the City Council, which has put it on the agenda for this Monday.

I invite you to join me at the City Council Meeting tomorrow evening to show support for the Upward Bound House family shelter proposal. Their planned expansion into Culver City will extend services that are greatly needed to families with children in our area, turning what is presently a motel into a safe, supervised, alcohol and drug free environment for case management, stabilization and renewal. This is an opportunity to bless many lives.^v

We are blessed. Let us also be a blessing. Amen.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved*, p. 72

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 73

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. 79

^{iv} *ibid.*, p. 82

^v The Culver City Council approved the Upward Bound application for the W. Washington Blvd emergency shelter for homeless families with children at its Jan. 14th meeting. The meeting lasted until 1:30 a.m. The vote was 3 to 2. Many members of Culver-Palms UMC attended, spoke in support, and stayed until the 1:30 a.m. conclusion.