



Sermon of May 9, 1999



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"HOW TO BE A BLESSING"

I Peter 3:8-12

John 14:15-21

I love the story of a man who bought a new Alfa Romeo, the luxury Italian sports car, and wanted to do something to celebrate his purchase. So he went to the Catholic priest, and said, "Father, will you bless my Alfa Romeo?" The priest said, "Yes, but what's an Alfa Romeo?" The young man said, "Never mind, you wouldn't appreciate the significance of this purchase in my life." So he went to an Episcopal priest, and said, "Father, I've just bought an Alfa Romeo. Will you bless it for me?" He said, "Yes, but what's an Alfa Romeo?" He went to a Methodist minister, and said, "I've just bought an Alfa Romeo. Will you bless it?" The minister said, "Wow! An Alfa Romeo! What a terrific car. I've always wanted to ride in one. Will you give me a ride? And by the way...what's a blessing?"

We Methodists don't know very much about these liturgical acts, but I think I know what a

blessing is. I've been called upon to give one a number of times. We ask God to bless certain things, and by doing that we hope that some good will come from it. If it's an object, that the object fulfill its purpose. If it's a person, that they will succeed, have a joyful life, and be fulfilled.

As a matter of fact I've administered a lot of blessings in my vocation as a minister. I've blessed marriages. I do that all the time. I've blessed new buildings. I've blessed recently purchased homes for people. I've blessed people going on a journey. I bless meals all the time. We have a ritual in the *Book of Worship* for blessing animals. I've never done that, but I've blessed clubs, I've blessed conventions, conferences, councils. I've blessed graduating seniors. I blessed the opening day of Little League one year. I wanted to throw out the first ball, but the mayor got to do that. I've even blessed boats. The hitch there is that I get to go fishing on the boat that I bless.

All these blessings are formalized acts of the church, they are liturgical acts through which we pray that God will prosper the object or the person, bringing to them happiness or success, and joy to their lives. But in our lesson for this morning, from the First Letter of Peter, I want you to see the word is used there, but it's a little different. It says we are to be the blessing.

Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing.

There it is. We are to be a blessing to other people. This is not about asking God to bless something, this is about you blessing someone. "For to this you have been called."

The passage, of course, has reference to Jesus' teaching, "Do not return evil for evil; but on the contrary love your enemies, be good to those who hate you. Bless and do not curse those who do evil to you." Paul, in his letter to the Romans, paraphrased it, "Bless those that persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." I Peter summarizes the same teachings by saying, "Do not return evil for evil; but bless, to this you were called." Over and over again in the New Testament we are called to be a blessing. That's our calling as Christians, to bless and not to curse.

And in case you think that those are two old-fashioned words from a superstitious age when we were not so enlightened as we are today, let me tell you how powerful those two things are in our life even today.

The truth of the matter is that we find out who we are from other people. As John Updike said, "We get our bearings daily from other people." You tell someone over and over again that they are a failure, or that they won't amount to very much, and pretty soon they'll begin to act that way. Do you know what you've done to them when you do that? You've cursed them. You haven't uttered any voodoo, you haven't stuck pins in a doll, or anything like that. But you have just as effectively put a curse upon them. You tell a little child that it's not going to amount to very much, or you compare children with others invidiously, that's a curse too. They'll grow up thinking they don't amount to very much. They'll probably do some dumb thing when they grow older, just to prove the curse that was put upon them.

On the other hand, you tell somebody that they are made in the image of God, that God loves

them, and they have great potential, that they can even fail and it doesn't matter because we all make mistakes, because you have it within you. You can tell them this, to do better because you are a child of God, so keep on trying. And the chances are they will keep on trying, and eventually succeed in their life. So you have given a blessing to them when you do that.

Or you tell a child that they are unique, there's nobody else just like them, and therefore what they have to offer in this life is unlike what anybody else can offer, no matter what it is, and it will be celebrated and received as a gift because it has come from you. It won't be valued in relation to other people's talents or gifts. You do that, especially to a child, and you bless them. And they will be blessed, and their life will blossom.

I heard about a little boy who was in preschool. The practice of the teacher in the preschool was to award the little children for whatever they did, to recognize some achievement by giving them an award. The award was a great big star on their clothing. The little boy came home from preschool, a big star on his shirt. His mother said, "What did you do to earn that star?" He said, "I'm the best rest!" That teacher blessed that little child.

We are all made in the image of God. And there is a wonderful life that is waiting for each one of us. But in large part, we receive that life from other people, in the sense that other people tell us who we are and what we're worth. That's why Peter says, "Bless, don't curse, for to this you were called."

That is in the ninth verse. In the preceding verse he suggests the way that we can do that, the way we can be a blessing. He lists these things: have unity of spirit, sympathy and love of everyone, and then these two phrases, a tender heart and a humble mind. It's those last two qualities I want to look at this morning. On this Mother's Day I think they are most appropriate, because we understand mothering, parenting, a tender heart, and a humble mind. I am certain that if we can gain those two, then we will be a blessing to everybody.

First, a tender heart. The Greek word can also mean "compassionate." It's the capacity to feel what other people are feeling, to put yourself in another person's place, to get inside another person's life so that you know what they're going through. That's what it means to be tender-hearted.

Some years ago you may remember there was a movie called *The Elephant Man*. It was the story of an Englishman born with a terrible disease that caused his body to be deformed, especially his face. It was a true story. His family abandoned him when he was just a boy. They sold him to a circus. The circus put him in the freak show and advertised him as, "The Elephant Man."

One day he escaped from the circus and made his way to London. And there as he was wandering the streets a sensitive physician found him and sheltered him in his quarters. And there the doctor and the viewer of the movie could see that inside this man there was a most precious and beautiful soul. It was a wonderful irony that teaches us so much about life, that although the exterior may be distorted, even ugly, inside of each one of us there is a precious soul, the image of God, remarkably preserved as innocence inside of this man. The public couldn't see that, the public wasn't interested in seeing that. The public looked only to the

exterior, to the deformity, to the ugliness. But inside, there was such beauty and innocence in the soul of this man.

In one striking scene he is walking through the streets of London with a hood over his head, as he always had whenever he went outside, so people couldn't see his face. Somebody pulled the hood off, then a crowd gathered. He began to run. The crowd chased him through the streets until they cornered him in a subway station lavatory among the urinals, taunting him, beating him. He cried out, "I am a human being!"

There is something in each one of us that cries out, "I am a human being, a child of God! Treat me that way." And I ask you, are not we, as Christians, the ones who are called to treat everyone that way, the ones who are called to be tender-hearted, compassionate, to feel what other people feel, to get inside other people's lives so you know what they have to endure, what they put up with. To this, we are called.

There is a term people use sometimes, "bleeding hearts." It is used pejoratively. To call somebody a bleeding heart is not to compliment them. It usually means that you say they're weak, not tough, they're irrelevant or naive. The crowd calls for vengeance, for retribution, for violence, and somebody speaks up and says, "I think we ought to love our neighbor, I think we ought to forgive and be merciful." And they say, "You're just a bleeding heart."

But what they may not know, those who use "bleeding heart" as a term of derision, is that the source of "bleeding heart" is Catholic piety. It's a picture of Jesus, you've probably seen it, with a heart on his tunic, a drop of blood coming from it. It's maudlin art, it's just terrible art, it's propaganda art really. But it serves its purpose, which is to reveal Jesus our Lord as tender-hearted. So tender-hearted he didn't condemn anybody. He didn't regard the external reality of anybody's life. He looked at what was inside of everybody, the image of God inside of every one.

He saw not only the way people are now, he saw the way they are supposed to become. He didn't look only on what we have done, but he looked on what we can be. And he treated us, therefore, as people with potential because we are loved by God. We can become that, he believed, if only we knew who we are. And he came to tell us who we are. Not only with his words, but with his deeds, his deeds of tender compassion. And that's how we're supposed to be, to be tender-hearted, and thus to be a blessing.

The second characteristic Peter lifts up is a humble mind. I imagine some of you have several candidates for the "Humble Mind Award." But humble mind is not what you're thinking. The Bible means something else by a humble mind. It's reminiscent of what Paul wrote to the Philippians. "Have this mind in you, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, humbled himself, took on the form of a servant, took on our flesh to be with us." Have this mind in you, a humble mind, which you saw in Christ Jesus. Which means if you seek to follow Christ, you will seek to be humble the way Christ was humble, who manifested humility by identifying with us, becoming like us, feeling our pain and our sorrow, even to the extent of taking our place, bearing the cross for us.

Some of you have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who opposed Hitler and joined the Resistance against Hitler in Germany, and was arrested and imprisoned, and executed just a few days before the Americans liberated his prison. When Jean and I were in Germany a couple of years ago we discovered on the map the name of this town, Flossenberg. I recognized it as the name of the prison where he was executed. We went there. It is clear over against the eastern border of Germany. It's just a small town. They've made a memorial out of the prison camp. There in that prison camp, Bonhoeffer and the other leaders of the underground resistance, Admiral Canaris, Stauffenberg and the others, were executed. It was an emotional visit for us. For my life as a young man had been shaped by reading the life of Bonhoeffer, and his writings.

Some of his writings are obscure. He writes in the traditional German ponderous theological style. But he produced some of the most helpful tools in Christian ethics. And here is one of them. He made the distinction between the "ultimate" and the "penultimate." The ultimate is the last, the final stage of history, the Kingdom of God. The penultimate is the next to the last. We live in the penultimate time. When the ultimate comes, then all things are going to come together. It's what Paul meant when he said to the Corinthians, "Then we will see clearly." When the ultimate comes, we're going to have all the answers. When the ultimate comes, all evil will be gone and good will triumph. When the ultimate comes, God is going to wipe away tears from everybody's eyes. That's the way it's going to be in the ultimate. But we're not there yet.

And Bonhoeffer said it's the temptation of Christians to approach other people as if we were there, to think that everything is clear to them, and that there are easy answers to hard questions. There are those Christians who do that, who go into situations where people are suffering and give easy, glib answers to the hard questions of life, who use pious language to explain terrible tragedies. They're the people who tell people who are suffering that it is God's will that this terrible thing has happened.

Fred Craddock tells of the time that he went home for his mother's funeral. His sister had taken care of their mother the last years of her life, and the death was hard for the sister. They had the funeral, and after the service friends brought food to the house for a reception. Everybody was there. One woman came to his sister, and said something pious, like, "She's better off now in heaven," impervious to the emptiness that a loss creates in another person's life. His sister didn't say anything, but Craddock went up to the woman, and said, "It's obvious you have never lost your mother."

To be a Christian means to have a humble mind. It means to realize that this is not the ultimate time, this is not the time when everything is clear to everybody, when there is no more pain and sorrow. This is not the time when all tears are wiped away. This is the penultimate time. This is the time before the end, when we do not see all things clearly. There are hard questions for which there are no answers, pain which doesn't make any sense at all, terrible things that happen in our lives we don't understand.

That's what it's like to live in the penultimate time, in the time before the Kingdom comes. And that's the world that Jesus came into. He didn't give us some passport into a perfect life. He came to be here with us in this life, humbled himself to be with us, left the ultimate behind,

became like us, lived the kind of life that we must live under the very conditions that we must live it.

Jesus did not come to give us answers. He came to give us himself. And Bonhoeffer says that that's what it means to live in the penultimate as a Christian, to live in it the way Jesus did. It means that we are to join others in their suffering, to try and understand what other people have to put up with in their lives.

It may mean simply going over to their home and making them a pot of tea. Or visit them in the hospital, or write a note, or make a phone call. It doesn't take much. You really don't have to say anything. Religious slogans so often reveal the distance between you and that person who is suffering. You may have ascended into the ultimate, but they are still living in the penultimate. You may think that you have all the answers. You may think that you've got it all together now. But to them, all that cheap answers do is illustrate how lonely they are.

What suffering people understand is not answers but incarnation, presence, being with them. They understand you leaving the safe world of certainty and dwelling where the sufferer must live. The way Jesus did, who "did not count his equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself and took on the form of a servant."

Tony Campolo teaches at Eastern Baptist College. He's a popular speaker, lecturer, and evangelist. He tells of the time he went to a funeral for a man named Kilpatrick. His mother had been after him since he was a boy always to go to funerals. He knew this man Kilpatrick, and so he went to his funeral. He arrived at the funeral home, went into the chapel, and nobody was there. He sat down and waited for people to come in, and no one came in. So he went up to the front, to the open casket, and looked in. That was not Kilpatrick in there. He was in the wrong place, or the wrong time. It was the wrong funeral.

He turned to leave, and just then an old woman walked up to him and took his hand. She said, "You were his friend, weren't you." And not knowing what to do, he lied. He said, "Yes, he was a very good man. Everybody liked him." She said, "Sit here with me." The preacher came in and read the service. After it was over he went with the woman in the limousine to the cemetery. He stood there with her by the graveside. As the casket was lowered into the grave he took a flower and placed it on the casket as it was being lowered. On the ride back to the funeral home he confessed to the woman, "I want to be your friend. And I can't be your friend unless I tell you the truth. I'm afraid I have to tell you that I really didn't know your husband. I came to his funeral by accident." The woman paid no attention to what he said. She just said this. "You'll never, ever, ever know how much your being here has meant to me."1

A tender heart, and a humble mind, like we saw in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself to be with us. To this we are called.

1 From Eugene Winkler

Help us to be masters of ourselves,

*that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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