

August 21, 2016
Numbers 6:22-27
Mark 10:13-16
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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The Blessing of Blessings

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today we have two readings.

The first reading is known as the Aaronic blessing, in honor of the priest Aaron, brother of Moses. In the original Hebrew language this blessing is succinct and carefully structured.

The first line has 3 words.

The second line has 5 words.

The last line has 7 words –

7 is considered a holy number.

Three of the words are “Yahweh,” the Hebrew word for God. The other 12 may subtly symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel. Throughout Hebrew tradition we see this kind of attention to the symbolic use of numbers.

This blessing is recorded in the book of Numbers embedded in the story as the Hebrew people are leaving Mt. Sinai and preparing to continue their journey in the wilderness on the way to the promised land. It is a blessing centered in the covenant between God and the people.

The second reading is also about blessing. It tells of a time when the disciples are trying to keep Jesus on schedule, trying to have some decorum in the gathering. In so doing, they lose sight of opportunities for blessing. Jesus has his heart in the right place.

SERMON

In baptism today, we give blessing to Ella Sue and her family. We also receive the blessing of Ella Sue’s presence. This blessing ripples out into our whole community. We give thanks for the gift of her life and the gift she is to life itself.

Blessing is always a multi-layered experience. The one giving the blessing is also blessed in the act of blessing. Maybe that’s what is meant in the saying, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” When you give – when you give a blessing (of whatever kind)– it ripples out far beyond what you can imagine and indeed ripples back to the one who gave.

Receiving a blessing can be such a blessing. At first, it may surprise us but then it warms our hearts. At a recent meeting of the Minister of Music Search Committee, Susan Weaver, the chair of the committee, brought us all words of blessing from another member of the congregation. She had been talking to this person in their neighborhood and as they parted the person said, “Blessings on you and the committee.” Susan shared with us how initially she was surprised but then so touched by this act of blessing. The whole committee is grateful for all your thoughts, prayers, and blessings.

When was the last time you received a blessing? When was the last time you offered a blessing?

You may have noticed that we as a culture have gotten quite comfortable with cursing – using words to invoke ill will on another. It's easy. It's dramatic. It's also very destructive.

As people of faith we are called to blessing –using words to invoke well-being for others. It's justly kind and it is life giving.

The act of blessing cuts through the façade of social interactions. It reminds us of what really matters. It calls on the covenant between us – maybe the covenant of a particular faith tradition or maybe the most basic covenant that we are all of the same race – the human race.

In fact, we share blessing quite regularly, often without being consciously aware of it – when we say goodbye. *Goodbye* simply comes from the words *God be with thee*. We usually raise our hand as we say goodbye. A raised hand with an open palm is a sign of blessing. Even without thinking about it we are offering a blessing.

I never thought about this raising and/or waving of the hand so directly as a sign of blessing before. Maybe that is why we instinctively wave to the baby as we welcome her into the congregation. We are blessing her.

Acts of blessing are embedded in traditions around the world. Those of us who participate in yoga are familiar with the blessing of *namaste* which traditionally includes a slight bow with palms together, fingers up, in front of you. In this

greeting/blessing one bows to the divine presence in the other.

Two other very famous blessings in American culture today have prominence from fictional films but are rooted in religious practice.

Star Wars – *the Force be with you*.

George Lucas intentionally based this on:

God be with you. Peace be with you.

Lucas' blessing has touched the hearts and imaginations of millions of people, even those who would claim to be non-religious. Blessings are more powerful than we often acknowledge.

Those of us of a certain age also remember the Vulcan greeting from Star Trek:

Live long and prosper,

Whose less well known response is

Peace and long life.

(With its accompanying hand greeting of a raised hand with separation between middle and ring fingers.)

Leonard Nimoy, who played Mr.

Spock, said the idea for this greeting came from an experience when his grandfather took him to a service in an Orthodox Jewish community. The men of the community covered their heads with prayer shawls, raised both their hands in this manner (with thumbs touching) and repeated the blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

The Lord look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Nimoy never forgot it.

Why this particular hand formation? In some Jewish writings it is suggested that this formation is a poetic depiction of a give window through which God sees and can be seen. In Celtic tradition we would call it a thin place, where heaven and earth meet.

Nimoy's Vulcan hand greeting, maybe we should say blessing, has also touched the hearts and minds of millions.

Did you notice in the story of Jesus and the children that he not only says words of blessing but that he lays his hands on them? Blessing is both spoken and symbolic – a hopeful word, a gentle touch, ways in which we offer connection and remember covenant. Blessing is ultimately about covenant with the Holy, a covenant that binds us one to another. Most blessings, in one way or another, pray for peace with God, with others, and with ourselves.

When was the last time you offered a blessing - to yourself? Is there a place where you are hurting in body, mind, or spirit? Imagine what a difference a word of blessing, a comforting touch could make to you. In our time of silence, I invite you to imagine just such a thing. Trust in the blessing of blessing. Be bold to say, *God be with me.*