

Why We Bless Things

On the first Sunday of every month, we'll gather for a service of blessing. We'll receive God's blessing in the sacrament of Holy Communion and then we will be a channel of that blessing to someone or something else—what that is will vary by the month. For each of these services I'll be posting very specific instructions so that you'll know what to expect and, if you can't be here, you can participate in your own way wherever you are. We will be livestreaming the services to YouTube and Facebook and that will take the place of the usual online service on the first Sundays.

During the week before each of those Sundays I'll be posting some specific instructions for what that specific service will be like and how to participate, but first I want to give you a bit of background on what we're doing and why we're doing it which applies to all the first-Sunday Blessing services.

In the Bible, God frequently is the one who blesses others, but the Psalms in particular are full of language like "Bless the Lord, O my soul," where human beings reflect God's blessings right back. There are also places in the Bible where people bless someone or something besides God, a function that is usually but not always identified with the priests. In Christian and Jewish tradition, God is always the source of the blessings that we give and receive, whether they are given directly by God or are mediated through others. And in Protestant tradition we affirm the "priesthood of all believers," which means any of God's people can serve the priestly function of being a channel of God's grace to others. We don't have to be ordained to bless something. We only need to put our own egos aside and remember that blessing is God's work and not our own.

But what is a blessing exactly? What is God trying to accomplish with a blessing, and what does it mean to be "blessed?"

The first time anything is blessed in the Bible is on day five of Creation in Genesis 1:22. There God blesses the creatures of the water and the air and tells them to "be fruitful and multiply."

And that's a common theme of God's blessings. There are lots of "be fruitful and multiply" verses. Sarah was unable to bear children until God blessed her and she was able to conceive Isaac. In Genesis 12 Abraham is blessed so that he might become a great nation that would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Ishmael is blessed with the promise that he will be "fruitful" and become a great nation himself.

So, it might sound like blessing just means procreation until you remember that God didn't just bless living beings. At the start of Genesis 2 God blesses the Sabbath day and sanctifies it. And of course, when we follow the example of the Psalmist and our souls turn around and bless the Lord, we're not inviting God to procreate and make more gods. So, what's a blessing for? What is the hope for the thing that is blessed?

While the Hebrew word for bless, *barak*, means to bend the knee, the concept of what is gained through a blessing is the broader concept of fruitfulness—to bear fruit that is pleasing to God and that fulfills God's purpose for whatever is blessed. To bless something is to express the desire that whatever is blessed will become what God created for it to be in all its fullness which implies health and longevity and a web of support to achieve those ends.

That means that a blessing is not just a hope but also a promise. God didn't make a world of solitary beings. God made ecosystems. That's part of the "be fruitful and multiply" thing. Become a multitude. Don't go it alone. To bless something is both to express a hope that whatever is blessed will fulfill God's purpose but also to promise to be an agent of help to bring that about. To bless something is not merely to say, "Hey, I hope it all works out for you." It's also to say, "I'm here for you to help make this happen." When we bless something or someone, we have expanded our own circle of care and attention to include whatever we have blessed.

To bless the Sabbath is also to promise to keep it, because if no one is keeping it, the Sabbath isn't fulfilling its purpose and our blessing is only so much hot air. To bless an apple tree and then not prune and tend it makes it less likely that God's purpose for the tree—to feed the world with a full harvest of good apples over many years—will happen. To bless a child and be unconcerned with conditions that make it difficult for that child to grow and thrive and become a healthy and balanced adult is to have abused the gifts of God. When God blesses us, we are reassured that we will have God's full measure of help in fulfilling our own purpose on earth. As those made in God's image, we convey that same promise when we serve as a channel for God's blessing.

Today's world is frightening, cruel, and harsh in almost every way that it can be. In the face of that, we have choices. We can give in to a paralyzing fear and do nothing. We can allow ourselves to be swept up in the hate and division. We can grab whatever security we can for ourselves and let others sort out their own problems. Those are all options. But these first Sunday Blessing services are proposing a different way.

By focusing on God's gift to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion and then becoming a channel of that blessing to something else, we can all offer at least one small act of kindness. We can love something enough to bless it, hoping that despite all the chaos, this person or thing will fulfill its God-given purpose and promising that we will be there to help that happen. These are not grand gestures, and the instructions for each month will show you how to do each blessing right from home if you're unable to be with us in person. But I believe they will help foster a sense of what is possible and create a light in the dark. If it becomes a daily habit, so much the better. What if we all started to see everything and everyone around us and wonder, "How can I help you be everything God created for you to be?"

My prayer is that actively participating in blessing a variety of things on a regular basis will help each of us reclaim a sense of the sacred. If we really saw all the world as God sees it—if we really absorb into our hearts what it means to bless and be blessed—there will be hope for the world indeed.