

Blessed to be a Blessing

TEXT: Genesis 12:1-5

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on November 2, 2025

When we get into difficult periods of our lives, we're often advised to count our blessings. There's a great old hymn with that name, and it's certainly good advice. But it can also be highly damaging advice, depending on the circumstances. Last week, when talking with Liz Walker about her Can We Talk program that helps people who have experienced trauma, we learned that one key to the program's success is a caring and listening presence. It's very much *not* telling those who are suffering to snap out of it and count their blessings.

We might consider that question for ourselves; but offering that advice to those in distress, serves to judge and minimize their pain, and they will most likely resent us for it, even if we happen to be right that they could benefit from the exercise. Romans 12 invites us to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Being able to do that is one of the best ways to ensure successful relationships of any and every kind.

But the potential for making people hold us at arm's length in our relationships is not the only danger lurking in the "count your blessings" advice; because, even when we are applying the concept to ourselves by responding to good fortune with "I am so blessed; I have this blessing and that blessing and look, I've counted 45 blessings just this morning!" we are implying that our good fortune is a sign of God's blessing.

That's not wrong exactly, but seeing our blessings as gifts from God to be tallied up, counted as a measure of God's favor, creates a direct line to the cruel attitude of believing that those who don't have what we do, have arrived at their condition because God has withheld blessings from them because they don't deserve God's favor. And, therefore, we are justified in withholding blessings from them, too.

The entire concept of God's grace is that God gives to us—all of us—regardless of merit. We don't have to apply and be approved for God's blessings. We proclaim that every time we take communion. Any good work we do is meant to be a joyous response to what we have already been given, not grudging or anxious payment for what we hope to receive. The "I have 106 blessings; how many do you have?" way of thinking doesn't lead us to an understanding of God's grace.

But while *counting* our blessings can be problematic, *recognizing* God's blessings in our lives is key to a life of faith and discipleship at individual, corporate, and civic levels. So, how do we talk about God's blessings without landing in the Prosperity Gospel, holier-than-thou trap?

That's what I want to try to pry out of God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12. It's a famous passage that marks the beginning of the three monotheistic religions...Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three religions trace their origins to this one man, and this faithful response to God's call here in Genesis 12.

God's call to Abraham—or Abram as he is known here at the beginning—commands him to take a great leap of faith...to leave the only home he has ever known and to venture to someplace he has never been. But God doesn't just command a hard thing. With the command comes a promise of blessing. And we immediately see that blessing as a reward for Abram agreeing to take that risk—payment for faithfulness.

But listen to what God actually says to Abram. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, SO THAT YOU WILL BE A BLESSING. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED."

The blessing is not a reward for Abram's faithfulness. The blessing is part of the call itself—blessing is the particular work that God is calling Abram to do—to make sure the blessings of God are spread to all the

families of the earth—and God sends him out from his home city and his own people to go live among the Canaanites to get the project started. That mandate is then repeated to Abraham’s son Isaac, and then to his son, Jacob who, as we saw in September, did not deserve such an honor even a little bit.

It’s very similar to Jesus telling his disciples—all themselves descendants of Abraham—that, after his ascension, they are to spread the gospel to the rest of Judea—not just Jerusalem—and then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. The mandate has not changed. The blessing of God’s love is meant for all the families on the earth; and that is accomplished by giving all the families of the earth the experience of God’s unconditional blessing by channeling God’s blessings to them through us.

We are blessed by God *in order that* we might be a blessing to others. Counting our blessings without then asking how God would like us to *use* those blessings misses the mark by a pretty wide margin. It’s not that we can’t partake in the blessings as individuals. They are given to us, but they are not given *ONLY* to us.

The closest analogy I can come up with is that it’s like sitting at dinner on Thanksgiving, with serving bowls heaped with food filling the center of the table. When the host picks up a big bowl of mashed potatoes and hands it to us; we are invited to take some for ourselves. But we are then expected to hand the bowl to the person next to us. Sharing from the feast at the table is the fundamental expectation, and the person who gets the bowl first is no more honored or blessed by the host than the last.

Further, if one particular person always takes so much that those who get the bowl later have little to nothing, a good host is going to start passing things in the other direction. And if the first person gets the bowl of potatoes, puts it down on their plate and says, “Wow! I am so blessed!” and just eats it all, well, dinner invitations are going to be scarce going forward.

And yet that’s what most of us do. God’s blessings frequently come to us when we are not physically present with others in the way we are around a dinner table. We can see our own full plate, but we can’t always see the empty plates of others or even who the specific person is that I need to share this blessing with. That’s obvious around a table but often not in other areas of life.

When I first moved to north central Florida in the late 1980’s, I was shocked that there could be homes with dirt floors right next to the well-manicured homes of the wealthy. Everything where I grew up in Rhode Island, even in very rural areas, was zoned so that the poor and the rich did not live near enough to see each other. Florida was very much zoned for racial segregation, as were the zoning laws where I grew up in Rhode Island, but in Florida I didn’t have to leave my street to know whose plate was empty at the table.

This was especially true in Cross City. I remember one of the girls in our youth group—I’ll call her Sandy—who begged me to come to her house to see her new bunk beds. She was 14 and was so excited about them. So, I went. I climbed up the combination of hand-placed cinder blocks and boards to get in the front door and Sandy led me to the bedroom she shared with her younger sister. There were the new bunks. A family member had built them—unstained, untreated plywood boards, one on top of the other. No bedding, no mattresses. Sandy told me with glee how they were allowed to bring the couch cushions into their new bunks to sleep on at night.

Sandy and others in that youth group also made me excited to cook for them. And most of you know those are words that don’t usually come out of my mouth. Cooking and entertaining others is one of the highest-anxiety-producing things I’m ever asked to do. But with those kids, it was different.

I didn’t have much. My salary was \$24,000 per year, and sometimes while serving there I went hungry myself. But the youth group met at the parsonage, and when Sandy saw the things in my cupboard, she was beside herself. “Canned peas!” she shouted. “They’re so good! We never get canned peas at my house.” Another girl was excited about SpaghettiOs.

And soon, those who went hungry more often than I did were seated around the parsonage table, laughing and sharing and filling up on canned peas and SpaghettiOs like it was a five-star Michelin restaurant. With the

lens pulled back to physically see the others at the table, I didn't suddenly look around the house and think "Wow! I am so blessed!"

Instead, it was like learning that I had always assumed the bowl of mashed potatoes was only for me and just ate it. A couple years later, one of the girls was moving out on her own and literally had no dinnerware at all. I had two sets of plates and I couldn't get rid of that second set fast enough to that girl who had none.

I went from "Wow—God has blessed me with two sets of plates" to, "Oh my goodness! What am I doing with two sets of plates when someone else has none!" It was the switch away from counting my blessings to recognizing that God has blessed me in order that I might be a blessing to others.

I hope that doesn't come across as some kind of virtue signaling, because passing the mashed potatoes to the next person is not a virtue, as the host of any dinner will tell you. I'm just trying to illustrate how our views and behaviors shift when we can actually know and see all those who share our world as children of God just as we are. And if we can't see them, we should ask why not and make the effort to improve our vision and to change systems that make others invisible to us.

God's blessings are the *resources* God gives us to fulfill our calling, and are therefore one of the biggest clues to our calling itself in any given time and place. And the basic calling for all those who look to Abraham as a spiritual ancestor is to spread the blessings we are given until all the families of the earth are blessed.

The particular emphasis that the Abrahamic religions bring to the world, and that is laid out in the calling of Abraham, is that God works in this world not FOR us, but THROUGH us. We are the ones responsible for ensuring that God's abundance is shared by all the families of the earth.

When we turn to God and say, "God, why do you let people starve?" it's a wonder God doesn't just smite us on the spot. That's like a company's director of marketing going to the CEO and saying, "Sir, why isn't our product selling?" Being a conduit for God's blessings getting to all the families of the earth is our job. God has provided the blessings to share; God is the host of the meal—we were handed the full bowl of mashed potatoes; but it's the job of each of us to take what we need from that bowl and keep on passing it around until all have enough.

From the minute God picked up Adam by the collar and plunked him down in the Garden in Genesis 2:15 and said, "Here, you're in charge. Serve and protect the earth," it has been our job to make sure no one went hungry, that no living thing went extinct, that the waters of the earth were always clean enough to drink and the air was always healthy and invigorating to breathe. We are the stewards of God's creation, from every blade of grass to every sparrow to all the families of the earth.

In the end, this all goes back to the notion of stewardship. Nothing we have is ours. Not our money or possessions, not our family or our bodies. It is all God's and we are the trustees of God's possessions. God treats us well as trustees...we are greatly blessed. But, like with Abraham, the whole point of God's blessing is to share it. A blessing is a responsibility. Our response to receiving a blessing is not meant to be "Oh, wow, look what I got!" It's meant to be, "Oh, wow! I wonder how God is calling me to use this?"

It's true of our possessions, but it's also true of our talents. God has blessed me with a talent for writing. Some of that blessing I use myself. It helps me communicate and make a living. But I know that my talent is given to me for a purpose beyond myself. And so, I also give of my talent to others...in books, in sermons, in devotions, in letters of recommendation, in helping others communicate what they want to say. In that way others are blessed, and that helps others better use their own blessings for still others.

God has blessed many in this church with amazing musical gifts. Because they have shared them with us, we have been blessed by that blessing. And some have pursued their own musical gifts outside the church, which blesses even more. Some share their teaching gifts or administrative gifts or the wonderful blessing of just showing up and helping wherever needed—like at the faire on Saturday—hint, hint.

God has blessed you. Count your blessings if that helps you recognize them. But don't stop there. The particular blessings you have received are strong clues to your calling. We are all blessed to be a blessing; we are given particular gifts so that God can put them to use for the world.

God's intention is that all the families of the earth should be blessed by the actions of God's people. It's our job, and has been since Genesis. Don't hoard it...spread it. Don't pay it back, pay it forward. For every material blessing you have received, for the gift of talent or health or land or a kind and loving spirit...whatever it is, you were given that blessing in order that you might find joy in it yourself and then use it to bless others.

The family of a friend of mine has a tradition of sharing a single dessert, which then becomes a game. The first person takes a bite and it is passed to the next person, who does the same and it keeps going around the table. If there are a lot of people it might be more than one dessert. But there's a single rule. If you eat the last bite of the dessert, you lose. It can get wildly silly as you get down to the final crumbs of cake as people try to take only one crumb and present the even greater challenge to the next person.

But the lesson it teaches—if you don't leave something for someone else you lose—is spot on; because being a blessing to others is also a blessing to us. Among children, one toy lovingly and willingly shared creates community and friendships. One toy hoarded creates tears and temper tantrums.

Wealth and resources that are lovingly and willingly shared creates a grateful and peaceful world. Wealth and resources that are stockpiled and hoarded leads to poverty and war. For those who look to Abraham or to the Bible for guidance, it couldn't be more clear. Enjoy God's blessings, count them one by one. And then, pass the potatoes. Pass the bread and the wine, until all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Amen.