

“Blessed Be”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Colossians 11: 1-20 and Luke 1: 68-79

Our Gospel text this morning is known as the Benedictus, from the Latin for “Blessed Be.” This scripture is a prophecy, in which Zechariah praises God, “who fulfills promises to Israel of liberation and redemption. Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, in their commentary on this passage relate to us that “Luke gives the impressions of direct divine presence.... Like Mary [in the Magnificat which precedes our passage] this fact of God victor and redemption of the people is a fact in history, not a promise yet to be fulfilled. Richard Rohr adds that the Benedictus says, “we will have knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin (Luke 1:77).” But then he says more than that, and this Thanksgiving week, I think it’s critical to recognize that, “the experience of a magnanimous God who loves us out of total gratuitousness” is fact and not fantasy.

Father Rohr continues, “There is no tit for tat. Grace isn’t for sale. That is the symbolism of Jesus kicking over the tables in the temple. One cannot buy God by worthiness, by achievement, by obeying commandments. Salvation is God’s loving-kindness, a loving-kindness that is “forever.” Read Psalm 136 for an ecstatic description of God’s faithful mercy. (Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations, Sunday, February 4, 2018*).” It is out of our thankfulness for God’s gift of unmerited grace that we respond with grace, love, mercy, and kindness toward others. It reverses what many think is the course of action

here. God acts first, we receive, then we act. Many Christians believe that if we act, we can coerce God into finally loving us.

God's response is found in Matthew's Gospel in at least two places (9:13; 12:7), "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice. The word used throughout the Hebrew scriptures (also called the Old Testament) is *chesed*, 'the steadfast enduring love which is unbreakable. Sometimes it's translated as 'loving-kindness' or 'covenant love.' The covenant is only broken from our side. God has made a covenant with creation and will never break the divine side of the covenant. *God's love is steadfast. It is written in the divine image within us.*" Isn't it amazing that at Thanksgiving we give thanks for all the material things like shelter, food, and family, when God has given us an even greater gift: love.

Rohr continues, "We are the ones who clutch at our sins and beat ourselves instead of surrendering to the mystery of forgiveness. Refusing to be forgiven is a form of pride. It's saying, "I'm better than mercy. I'm only going to accept it when I'm worthy and can preserve my so-called self-esteem." Only the humble person, the little one, can live *in* and *after* mercy. Take a minute to think about that. Refusing to be forgiven as a form of pride. Sometimes when we think we are humble, we are anything but. Truth be told, we are often terrible receivers, whether it is gifts from God or from one another. We think this is a virtue, and yet, if you've been on the other side and had your gift rejected for no good reason, you know that it can hurt.

I know someone who recently has started giving a gift to whomever does something positive for them. Maybe it's a ride somewhere. Maybe it's doing a service or sharing time. The receiver feels the need to give something to the giver. Almost always, the giver refuses thinking that they don't "need" anything, so why accept the gift? And yet, for the one who had to ask for help, receive the help, sometimes there is little they can do and this small token they offer is simply to say, "thank you." That is one reason it is so hard to be a receiver, especially if you have to do it often. This can be true as we age. It can be true when we have illness, financial hardship, or whatever else is going on. Maybe we can't give back, but we can share something. So, think carefully when you refuse a gift from someone for whom you have done a favor. It still might be the best idea, but don't be so sure. We know, and we have heard constantly that God loves a cheerful giver—and it's true—but I think it also true that God loves a gracious receiver. And when it comes to grace and to mercy, we very often are not good receivers of God's great gift.

"The mystery of forgiveness is God's ultimate entry into powerlessness. Withholding forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control, and diminish another. God in Jesus Christ refuses all such power. (Richard Rohr)." Further, "We do not attain anything by our own holiness but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy."

Returning to the Benedictus, Zechariah continues to sing of the upcoming birth of John the Baptizer, his son. In an interesting twist, Zechariah, like Mary before him, reminds us that God is also a God of political liberation. God desires food for the hungry; voice for the disempowered, but the whole thing begins with forgiveness of sin. It makes

we wonder, if we refuse to accept God's gifts of grace and of mercy, are we able to truly work for the liberation of another? In other words, what do we need to be free from in order to best assist in the freedom of another?

There's not a thing wrong with being thankful for all we have at Thanksgiving, but it's equally true that many of those same things we celebrate come at the cost of an even greater freedom. Remember, that doesn't mean they are bad in and of themselves, but our things can be bad when they begin to hold power over us and direct our lives.

The Benedictus, or "blessed be," reminds us of as our holidays do of our being blessed. But are we truly being thankful for all God have given us, or just our things? God has given us even greater gifts and blessings than we imagine. Maybe we have truly been forgiven, and that can free our hearts and minds from all the time and energy we spend thinking we have to do something to fix our mistakes! Maybe instead we can receive from God, be freed from the shackles of our own hearts and minds, and then we truly can freely engage with a world that desperately needs us and everything we have. No one can give unless they first receive. No one can continue on in the pursuit of things and truly take care of others. No one can genuinely love who doesn't first feel loved. And God's overwhelming message of our scripture is, "I love you." Until we receive that gift, it is unlikely our own little worlds, let alone our big world, will get any better.

Pray for peace on earth. Begin with receiving peace, love and mercy from a God who never withholds those gifts. Now THAT is something to be thankful for!

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.