

Toward What Do We Stretch and Lean? What Do We Seek?

Friends, old and new, each of us created and sustained by the fathomless love that is God, we arrive together to a moment of reflection on this sixth Sunday after Epiphany. During this season in the church year, we meditate on the Christ light that Jesus embodied in the world and wonder how we might more effectively follow his lead, embodying that same light through our living. As we face into a new week, I invite us to wonder together, **toward what do we stretch and lean? What do we seek?** Please pray with me.

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God, as you stir our spirits and our intellects today, increase our receptivity to your deep wisdom and companionship. We long for you to grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, we experience in today's gospel reading a narrative moment in which people in a crowd seek, stretch toward and, and lean into the healing power Jesus embodied. We heard these words: *"Indeed, the whole crowd was trying to touch Jesus, because power was coming out of him and healing them all."*

And we heard these words of encouragement from the prophet Jeremiah: *"Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope. They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream."*

Today's sacred texts invite us to seek out, stretch toward, and lean into the light of God's love – the marvelous power of our Creator to heal, restore, affirm, and build up – both within our individual lives and within our relationships in community.

These readings have reminded me of lyrics by independent singer songwriter Drew Nelson. In his album, *Immigrant Son*, Drew Nelson shares the following words in a song entitled "Tractor." Nelson writes,

*“Once I met a man, a pilgrim at the borderline
Well, I had fallen badly, and I said, ‘this happens all the time.’
Well, he picked me up, he dabbed my face, looked deep into my eyes,
Said ‘it don’t matter if you stumble, son – just keep stumbling toward the
light.’”*

Sometimes we gravitate and move smoothly toward the light. And sometimes we stumble as we move with the gravitational pull of grace. May we remind ourselves today that stumbling toward the light is still movement in the direction of love. And may Drew Nelson’s words also challenge us to hold our posture open to companions who might cross paths with us along the way and offer support. I’ll read his words again:

*“Once I met a man, a pilgrim at the borderline
Well, I had fallen badly, and I said, ‘this happens all the time.’
Well, he picked me up, he dabbed my face, looked deep into my eyes,
Said ‘it don’t matter if you stumble, son – just keep stumbling toward the
light.’”*

This week’s readings about seeking out, stretching toward, and leaning into the light of God’s love also remind me of an anonymous and brilliant debunking of the cliched phrase, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” I’ve seen a radical rewrite that crosses out “won’t give you more than you can handle,” keeps God in the scenario, and substitutes in “*will walk with you through the unthinkable. You were never meant to ‘handle’ it alone.*” In other words; seeking, stretching, and leaning in to trust the love of God will not eliminate painful challenges, but those actions will enable us to draw sustenance and weather through difficult times.

As we move into a closer look at our gospel reading for today, I invite us to consider what it means to be blessed. Part of what I will share will be familiar because Jesus’ sermon on the mount and the plain surfaces more than once in the three-year cycle of scripture readings (as do other texts that invoke the concept of blessing).

Across two millennia, Christians have used and misused the term. We have offered words of blessing to express love or to offer encouragement. Yet we have also sometimes invoked the word to minimize or explain away terror and grief. And we have sometimes invoked the word in ways that maximize misperceptions of God being more present with one than with another.

The actual meaning of the word blessed is to be consecrated, declared holy, devoted to a particular purpose. Blessed, consecrated, declared holy, devoted to a particular purpose.

Let's hear again the various specific blessings in our readings for today. Listen for how their original audiences may have heard these words of reminder that they were consecrated, holy, devoted to a particular purpose. From the prophet Jeremiah: *"Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope. They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream."*

From Jesus in the gospel according to Luke – this time, in the words of the biblical paraphrase called *The Message*:

"You're blessed when you've lost it all.

You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.

You're blessed when the tears flow freely.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears your name to discredit me."

Maybe people in the times of Jeremiah and Jesus received these blessings for what they really were – reminders that they were consecrated by God's love, holy in their identities as children of God, devoted to the purpose of following the law of love. Key to Jesus' sermon is that he acknowledges difficult circumstances he knows his audience experiences (loss, hunger, grief, bullying), yet invites them to remember their identity and their purpose.

I invite us to explore the phenomenon of blessing in our own lives. Each of us has likely received words of blessing in a one-to-one encounter at some point in our lives. In fact, like me, you may have a collection of experiences of being blessed in ways that have ranged from empowering, to irritating, to hurtful.

I can offer the following scenario from my own life that illustrates an interaction around the term blessing being experienced as empowering, irritating, and hurtful all within a close-knit community. I am a co-moderator of a Facebook support group called Lowe Syndrome Parents. Many of you know that my son Sam has Lowe Syndrome, which affects his eyes, his kidneys, and his brain. Boys and men with Lowe Syndrome experience a wide range of symptoms. Their ways of interacting with the world vary widely as well. As co-moderator of this Facebook group, I find myself mediating arguments from rare time to time. Once, a newcomer to our group (having reviewed introductions, photos, and various postings by other parents) offered an exuberant introduction of themselves and their son, stating that they felt “lucky” that their son does not have symptoms as severe as other boys. Well! That spurred a firestorm of conversation. Another parent chimed in that they don’t think of themselves as lucky but consider themselves blessed to parent their son. Another parent chimed in that they did not believe having a son with Lowe Syndrome had anything to do with luck, blessing, or the lack of either one, but that it simply is what it is, and we do our best to live with it. Many personal truths were stated, and I did my best to be a neutral mediator.

So while the early hearers of our scripture readings for today may have actually heard and interpreted the blessings as reminders of their identity as God’s people whose mission was to do the work of God’s love, I do find that many people in this land (in this millennia) seem to think of God’s blessing as landing in our lives like birthday gifts land in outstretched hands, making good things appear and good experiences happen in the lives of those who love God, neighbor and self. God is imagined to be delivering blessings even more invisibly than a magic wand.

This misrepresentation of God's power to bless is nonsense – dangerously powerful nonsense. It imagines that God's power in our lives is managerial in nature. But Jesus came to the world to remind us that God is WITH us, not that God is MANAGING us. God's power is in the form of accompaniment, not control. Kate Bowler has been a teacher at Duke Divinity School and, as a young adult, has been a survivor of stage four colon cancer. She has published a book entitled, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.

Well, even as each of us has felt irritated or hurt by someone's misguided attempt to recognize a blessing in our life, we have also been empowered by blessings when people remind us that we are consecrated by God's love, that we are devoted to the work of love just as we are. If you haven't received such a blessing in recent times, let's hear the blessings again from scripture, but listen to them for yourself – in your own circumstances:

"You're blessed when you've lost it all.

You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.

You're blessed when the tears flow freely.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears your name to discredit me."

God uses us for the work of God's love at all times, spaces, and stages of our lives. We need to make the efforts of stretching out, leaning into, and seeking after God's love. Hear again the words from Jeremiah to you:

"Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope.

They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream. When the heat comes it feels no heat; its leaves stay green. It is untroubled in a year of drought, and never ceases to bear fruit."

That we bear fruit is not God blessing us. Bearing fruit happens through God empowering us to stretch out, lean in, and keep seeking a more loving way. Fruits are natural consequences of us being grounded in the knowledge that we are loved by God as we are.

We need to be open to where love is calling us to stretch and lean in. **Where is your particular embodiment of the love of God needed for the realization of love, justice and peace?**

My sons love a particular song entitled, “Calling at the Crossroads.” I’ve sometimes heard a chorus of this request while commuting in our car: “Mama, I want to hear ‘calling you’... Mama, I want to hear ‘calling you.’” Here are lyrics from the refrain of Bryan Sirchio’s song, “Calling at the Crossroads.”

*“There are many voices that call to you
And God's voice won't always be loud
But if you want to do what Christ wants you to
Here's a truth to think about*

*Where your greatest source of joy
Intersects with the needs of the world
Go and find that place
And hear the Spirit calling you (calling you)*

*Where your greatest source of joy
Intersects with the needs of the world
Go and find that place
And hear your calling at the Crossroads”*

Bryan draws on the words of noted theologian Frederick Buechner on vocation being where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. Our gladness is hopefully based in our knowledge that we are blessed – that is, beloved – always.

I would like to close with the words from Jeremiah again. I invite you to hear them as a blessing spoken to you. You might choose to close your eyes and hold your hands open to receive this blessing: *“Blessed are [you] who put [your] trust in God, with God for [your] hope. [You] are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream.”*

Friends, let us go forth, rooted in our knowledge of God's love, rooted in knowing that we are blessed. Let's stretch our ways of enacting God's love, because love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
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