

Blessing One Another

It once was said and has oft been repeated, 'Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary.' And worship is the work of the people. We have already sung and touched the gospel message. We've also heard words of gospel. So my words of reflection this morning are going to be strategically fairly brief given the fullness of our service. Amen? Amen!

Blessing is "*a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen.*" So writes one of my favorite authors, the late John O'Donohue. I invite you to join me in a prayer, closing your eyes if it helps you to arrive to this moment.

Holy Loving Spirit, we welcome your circle of light to rest on each of us. We are grateful for freedom to gather – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. We come to this hour, weary from our shared struggle for righteousness in this land and weary from our private struggles. We trust you to kindle something in our hearts and soften something in our minds so that we can be part of protecting, healing, and strengthening one another. We pray this as students of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Friends, this morning's scripture reading offers us an opportunity explore what it is looks and feels like to bless one another (as we do with our young people each week). In Greek, the word blessed, *makarios*, means deepening joy and contentment through spiritual abundance and the meeting of all true needs among people.

In asking what it looks and feels like to bless one another, **I am asking us to consider how we can draw circles of protective, healing, strengthening light around one another such that our truest needs for joy and contentment are met.** Now, that feels to me (and perhaps feels to you) like a pretty tall order.

Indeed, most vitally important efforts are rigorous – requiring our grit, resolve, and (importantly) trust in the love of God to guide us. And this season that follows our celebration of Christmas (God with us!) – this Epiphany season calls us to anchor ourselves in the light of Christ – the loving light Jesus embodied in a way that showed us that no one is outside the circle of God’s love.

So I invite you to wonder with me this morning: **How has someone drawn a circle of light around you in recent times? And who can you identify who may need your blessing in that way?** I encourage you to hold that question in mind as we move through this morning together.

I have experienced blessing (the drawing of a circle of protective, healing, strengthening light around me) in recent days while gathered at US Bank, the Whipple building, and downtown Stillwater for moments of protest - faithful, passionate, peaceful protest against a cruel authoritarian regime that is harming and killing our neighbors. I experienced the drawing of the circle during our neighborhood vigil last evening.

With whom have you experienced blessing (this drawing of a light-filled circle) -

- as you entered this space today?
- as our choir sang our Hallelujah?
- as we heard from our new members and laid hands on them?

And how will you experience a circle of light in coming moments –

- as we share prayers of the people?
- as practice deep welcome and inclusion at the Communion table?
- as we greet one another during fellowship time?
- as convene for our Annual Meeting to consider where we’ve been and where we’re going as a community of people living out our heartbeat of *“Connect, Grow, Love”*?

I invite you to place a hand on your heart now and join me in saying aloud our heartbeat. We'll say it three times at a gentle, persistent pace. Here we go: *"Connect, Grow, Love. Connect, Grow, Love. Connect, Grow, Love."*

Let's turn to this morning's readings to draw inspiration for continuing to draw circles of light according to our shared heartbeat.

I appreciate the language and spirit with which the *First Nations Version* of the Bible articulates this moment in the gospel according to Matthew. So I'll share two brief parts again.

"When 'Creator Sets Free' (Jesus) saw this great crowd, he went back up into the mountainside and sat down to teach the people. His followers came to him there, so he took a deep breath, opened his mouth and began to share his wisdom with them and teach them how to see Creator's Good Road."

I wonder: will each of us follow Jesus in these ways? As another approaches you in the coming days (however like or unlike you you assume that person to be), will you sit down, take a deep breath, and share wisdom with that one other person who comes your way?

And in these times, as you wake every day to pursue love and justice so desperately needed, I am deeply moved by how one of the verse (one of the blessings) reflects on our shared life in Minnesota today:

"Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are hunted down and mistreated for doing what is right, for they are walking the Good Road from above. Others will lie about you, speak against you, and look down on you with scorn and contempt, all because you walk the road with me. This is a sign that Creator's blessing is resting on you."

I invite you to close your eyes. In addition to those words of blessing, I want to share the turning point in the beautiful blessing from Jan Richardson this morning – because we know that God is with us when we are at our lowest and feeling most depleted and as we rise. Richardson writes (and I invite you to let this flow over you personally):

*“This blessing knows
you can carry your own sorrow,
your own grief.
It knows the weariness
that visits you,
the questions
that attend your road.*

*It knows, too,
how you keep turning yourself
toward mystery,
keep turning yourself
toward hope,
keep turning yourself
toward this world
with the beautiful stubbornness
by which a way is made.”*

Friends, may we be encouraged and empowered to draw circles of protective, healing, strengthening light around one another – both those beloved people we already know and those who are as yet strangers to us, or, in the words of Sikh author Valarie Kaur, those who are *“a part of me I do not yet know.”* Be the light, friends. Draw the circle wide. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Matthew 5:1-12, "Blessing That Knows"