

Benediction: Remember Who You Are

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Genesis 1:26–27, Matthew 5:13–14 22

When it first crossed my mind to close out my preaching these last three Sundays with a series on the benediction, I dismissed the idea. It felt too much like using a captive audience to show all the pictures from my vacation.

What changed my mind was the realization that it's not really my benediction.

It's ours.

For those of you who have not been around here that long, I'll share how it started. I used to do the benediction from the back of the sanctuary. On one of my first Sundays 18 years ago, at the end of the service, I walked to the back and spontaneously spoke a benediction that was not exactly like this one, but close.

The next Sunday, I walked to the back again, and did another benediction that reflected the theme of that morning's worship. After the service, several people came by, probably some of you, and said to me:

We like that other one, the one you did last week.

In one of my earliest sermons, I suggested that over the years, we would be writing our own version of the Gospel together. That did not mean, of course, that we would ignore the New Testament Gospels, and replace them with our own. We have done a lot of digging around in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But even these Gospels, as New Testament scholarship has revealed, are as much the work of the earliest church communities, as they are an authorship of four individual writers.

The Gospels reflect what it was about the story of Jesus that was especially important to these first century churches. That's why each of the four Gospels is different from the others. Northern Virginia is different from Northeast Arkansas, just as first century Antioch was different from Ephesus. Gospels written in different contexts will have different flavors.

There are plenty of congregations that would have let me know a long time ago that this benediction was unsuitable:

What do you mean, "Remember who you are?" That's ridiculous!

You are daughters and sons of God? For one thing, if you're going to say that, it should be sons and daughters, not daughters and sons. And you shouldn't say it at all. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the Son of God.

Besides, we don't want the same benediction every week. In fact, we don't want a benediction at all. We just want you to close the service with a prayer, and don't do the same prayer every week.

This benediction, years ago, slipped out of my hands and became ours, because of the way you received it. You have received generously in so many ways what I've had to offer, and because of you, I'm heading into retirement with a heart full of gratitude.

But I'm talking this morning about our benediction.

I have seen the looks on your faces, your attentiveness, your smiles, and sometimes the tears in your eyes. In all these years, the benediction has never felt routine. There has been some humor—of course, there's always laughter here. One Sunday, I left out:

to be who you already are,

and if we had a worship police force, I might have been arrested. There was almost a citizens' arrest.

Another Sunday, I paused, held out my hands, and you finished the benediction.

I want to tell you something that's a bit personal. I have been in a small group of friends for almost 30 years. For most of this time, there were six of us, and we used to get together once a month. Now it's only a few times a year. Two of our friends have died. We were at dinner back in August, and the remaining four of us were talking about my impending retirement. They have heard about our congregation during these 18 years, but I had never said anything about the benediction.

When I mentioned it, and said something about how astonished I had been by the way it was received, they wanted to hear it. One member of the group had a very distinguished career as a church consultant, one is a judge in D.C., and one is a physician.

We'd never before shared communion in a public place, but one of the guys had brought communion. He led it as the officiant, and at the end, asked me to say the benediction again. As I did so, these three whom I have known and loved for three decades, looked at me as if they had never seen me before, and there were tears and expressions of deep friendship.

I was stunned, and I'm telling this now because it hit me how powerful our life together as Beloved Community can be outside this place. There's a readiness, and a hunger, for what we have learned and experienced together about the Gospel of Jesus. And I can tell you:

What is here is not everywhere.

I cannot say this about everything, but I can say about our benediction that I have no ego attached to it. My sense of it being ours runs that deep. And there's no reason for us to have any congregational ego about the gospel we are writing together.

What it means to be truly welcoming and inclusive,
to build community, to share the love of God, to do the work of justice,
to remember who we are as daughters and sons of God,
to walk the Way of Jesus as his friends and disciples,
to be willing for Holy Spirit to be at loose in the world through our lives—

all of this is far more powerful than we may realize.

Congregational life can be like a workshop, and it's easy to forget that what is being discovered and lived out here matches exactly the hunger and longings of so many who have not yet been reached by our life together.

My favorite hymn is *Morning Has Broken*. I just find it so evocative:

*Morning has broken, like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken, like the first dove.*

It may sound odd to say that in order to remember who we are, we must remember the breaking of the first morning of creation. Yet—what is so vivid and in plain sight in this story has been forgotten far more than it has been remembered.

*In the beginning, the very beginning, the very first morning,
God began creating the heavens and the earth.*

And when the moment was right, God said:

*Let us make humankind in our own image,
according to our likeness.
So God created humankind,
in the image of God,
God created them.*

At our Tuesday morning bible study, we were talking about this text from Genesis, and as we talked about equality between women and men, Bob Sampson pointed out that God intended it.

Equality was God's intention from the very beginning. Do we need any more evidence of how costly it is not to remember? How much further evolved would humankind be if it had not been forgotten or ignored that God intended all of us to be equal? If this had been remembered and honored and lived, there would have been no discrimination, no slavery, no misogyny.

Sometimes words become so common that the meaning is not clear, so here's a description of misogyny:

The hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women or girls. Misogyny manifests in numerous ways, including social exclusion, sex discrimination, hostility, patriarchy, male privilege, belittling of women, disenfranchisement of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification.

Think for a moment what the church universal has missed by clinging to male-dominated clergy. Think of how different our politics and public life would have been if the doors had been wide open to women.

So what is it we need to remember? What is it we must not forget, for the good of our own souls; for the overall health of our civic, social and cultural life; for the life of the planet entrusted to us by God on these first mornings; for the benefit of humankind all across the world?

Bob said something else on Tuesday morning. After we read these words from Genesis, he said it so quietly, but powerfully, and his words went right through me. Bob said it better than any commentary, essay, or sermon I've ever read or preached. He said:

There's something sacred about us.

There's something sacred about us.

There's something sacred about us.

Will you say it with me?

There's something sacred about us.

When we forget that, when we do not remember, we live beneath our God-given dignity, sometimes so far beneath that like the prodigal son, we wake up in a pigpen.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to disciples gathered there, the ones he would call his friends:

*You are the salt of the earth.
You are the light of the world.*

Jesus was not a cheerleader. Or maybe he was, if that means that he tried to get their attention, and shout out to them that their true stature was far more **grand** than they had ever imagined. Jesus was there to wake them up, to help them get up, and move, and do something—to join God wholeheartedly in the work of justice, that the intentions of God will be done on earth, as they are in heaven.

If Bob were a first century follower of Jesus, and had said to him:

It sounds to me like you're saying there's something sacred about us,

I think Jesus would have said to the Apostle Bob:

Yes! Yes!

That's it!

You got it!

Just as there is something sacred about me,
there's something sacred about you.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

You are God's beloved daughters and sons.

You are my friends and disciples.

God's Spirit will be at loose in the world through your lives.

This is all true.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.