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## Departing with a Blessing

Luke 24:44-53

A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on May 8, 2016

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“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace”(Num 6:24-26). “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”(Rom 15:13). “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you”(2 Cor 13:13). These are some biblical blessings that we often hear at the end of a worship service for the benediction. We don’t know what Jesus said to his disciples at the end as he ascended. Maybe he said what we’re saying to Page auditorium today—“Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Hey Hey Hey Goodbye.” Probably not. We don’t know what he said exactly but we do know that “he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” Jesus gives a benediction as his final gesture on earth. Jesus could have just said in a presidential fashion, ‘Peace, I’m out’ and drop the mic, but he lifts his hands and blesses those before him.

What is a blessing or benediction? The word “benediction” comes from Latin, meaning a “good word.” This good word is usually the last word in the liturgy. And it’s not really the word of the presiding minister. It is the word of God from God about God and what God is going to do and is doing in that moment. Melinda Quivik, in a little but splendid book on the service of the Word, says, “The benediction or blessing is not about what the people have to do once they have left the worship but about what God is going to continue doing in each person’s life every day.” “To give a blessing is to enact performative utterance, so to say the words, ‘The Lord bless...’ is to make blessing happen.” It’s one of the privileges of serving God—to bless others. I’m not talking about saying, “bless your heart” because we know that may not always mean what it says on the surface; there can be a not-so-favorable subtext.

But a blessing or benediction is an authoritative pronouncement of God’s favor on people, places, events or things. Throughout scripture, we encounter many acts of blessing. God blesses seas creatures and birds of the air in Genesis (Gen 1:22); King Melchizedek blesses Abram (Gen 14:19-20); Isaac blesses Jacob (Gen 27:27-30); Jesus blesses children (Mark 10:16) and even his disciples as he departs (Luke 24:50). Blessing others is in the DNA of God and should be an aspect of every Christian’s ethic. Blessing should be expressed through followers of God because if we don’t enact this posture of God, who will?

To be clear, there are blessings as well that are prayers in which God is praised for the gift of something rather than divine blessing being invoked directly on someone or something. This is why we can say that we ‘say a blessing’ before we eat and drink. It’s not just that God blesses but we bless God. The Jewish notion of *berakah* (in Hebrew) is the root word for this particular understanding of blessing: “Blessed be God, who has done...x y or z”(Gen 24:26-27; Ex 18:10-11, Luke 1:68ff; 1 Peter 1:3). We bless God who has blessed us.

But what Jesus does by the lifting of his hands is to offer God’s blessing, God’s benediction, over his followers. The image of Jesus offering a blessing is prominent in early Christian and Byzantine art through the Medieval period and into the Renaissance. The specific right hand gesture of blessing you will see most frequently is Christ’s first two fingers and his thumb extended and his third and fourth finger closed. We see this in many iconographic images of Christ in the form of mosaics or stained glass windows or sculptures or paintings. One of the most common of these images is the Christ Pantocrator (or Christ Almighty), which depicts Christ, usually isolated against a golden background, with his head encircled by a halo, his left arm hugging the gospels to his chest and his right hand raised in the sign of benediction. As Christian art developed further, this blessing gesture took on more theological

significance. The three open fingers came to represent the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and the two closed ones represented the dual nature of Christ as both human and divine.

At the conclusion of his earthly liturgy, just as God's blessing or benediction ends our liturgies, Jesus concludes with a blessing. This final gesture of Christ on earth has clearly taken on significance throughout the centuries of church as we see in this artwork. It's more than a perfunctory act; it says something about the nature of God and God's view of us. God-in-the-flesh's final act, final word is not a command or charge, which is different from a benediction. Nor is a blessing well wishes or a mere farewell as might be heard at some churches after the last musical note ("see you guys next week"). The blessing offered by Christ is the conveyance of the promise of God that God uttered in the beginning to our forefathers, "I will bless you and you will be a blessing to others."

Why is a blessing so important? It does say something about the nature of God that from the beginning God was blessing the creation and that God wanted creation to be fruitful and to flourish. But in our day, a blessing is also countercultural in a society full of cursing and negative critique. A blessing is a gesture of resistance against a culture of cursing. It's so much easier to curse someone or to be negative about or toward someone than offer a positive picture or word about them. It's so much easier to critique another than to praise and celebrate a fellow human being's accomplishments. We can see the speck in our neighbor's eye but neglect the log in our own (Matt 7:3-5). We've seen it in this presidential primary season, haven't we? Name-calling, disrespect for humanity, hateful language, bigotry, fear, and cursings. That our political sphere allows this, says something about the society in which we live. That some find it entertaining or right is a revelation of moral decay and apathy. We do not live a culture of blessing by any means but one of cursing each other and stepping on top of one another for selfish goals and high TV ratings. Dehumanizing others actually wins votes. That's despicable and even more so when cursings are supported by Christians.

When G.K. Chesterton was five his brother Cecil Edward was born. And G.K. said: "Now I shall always have an audience." But what he got was a heckler. He said, "We argued throughout our boyhood and youth until we became the pest of our whole social circle. We shouted at each other across the table, on the subject of Parnell or Puritanism or Charles the First's head until our nearest and dearest fled at our approach, and we had a desert around us." (Joseph Pearce)

The bickering and quarreling and the entrenched arguments and animosity and pure disregard for others, especially those who are different, have created a desert in this nation and state. It's a dry, weary land without living water. And I'm tired of it. Tired of all the fighting and division and bitterness and lack of understanding or the unwillingness to learn and listen. Tired of the intra-Christian turmoil and debates. Tired of how theo-ethical amnesia has set in so that we forget our common humanity. I'm tired of all of the cursing happening even in the name of Christ when Christ shows us through his final act on earth how he wants to be remembered and followed. Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed them. Christ offers another way, a different culture of faith or ethos or ethic. A different way of being and doing in the world.

To say a blessing, to gesture a blessing like Jesus did, is to raise one's hand in defiance of hands raised or lifted up to abuse another. To raise your hand in a blessing is to counter brawls that break out in parliaments. To raise your hand in a blessing is to present a counter visual image to videos that emerge of school fights or scuffles at political rallies. Jesus lifted his hands to bless, to heal, and to love. He's demonstrating how he wants to be remembered. He blessed them despite themselves because a blessing has to do with who God is, not who we are. We, Christians, have got it all wrong in thinking that we are the spiritual gatekeepers of the faith, that we in our sanctimonious religiosity the litmus test for what it means to be a Christian. God help us if we are the epitome of discipleship and judge others based on our own reflection in the mirror. If we could get out of the cursing business and start the blessing business that may be the most powerful Christian witness we can offer in our day.

There's a Lutheran pastor who in recent times goes to a local coffee shop every Thursday for a few hours to drink coffee though he is a tea kind of a guy. That part isn't surprising but he also goes for something else. His main

reason to drink coffee on Thursdays is not really to drink coffee. Every time he goes, he takes a little sign with him. The sign reads, “Free Prayer” and he includes at the bottom a quote from Martin Luther—“Pray, and let God worry.” Wearing his clergy collar, he sits down at a table to drink coffee but to also offer prayer to anyone who comes to him. There was one man who approached him with whom he ended up taking a walk and hearing this man’s unvoiced prayers and pains over his family and friends. According to the pastor, “Death had hollowed out [this man’s] spirit, and he had spoken about [his pain] to no one.” But when he saw the words “free prayer” he knew that he couldn’t keep it all inside anymore. There was another pray-ee who approached the pastor at the table and requested prayer for a friend undergoing heart surgery. And when that man sat down, he prayed for the pastor, so in offering a blessing for another the pastor himself was blessed.

What if we bless people into the faith rather than scare or argue them into it? What if we bless others to such an extent that they fall in love with Jesus through our treatment of them? We know many are turned off of Christianity because of Christians, not because of Jesus. The problem has been our Christian witness not the one to whom we witness, Jesus Christ.

So the question is how do you want to be known or remembered? What kind of Christian do you want to be? We don’t know what Jesus said but we know what he did, how he gestured. What will be your final word or gesture at your end? What will be your legacy? What will be your last testament to what you believed and whom you believed and who you are? What do you want to leave behind? I’m not saying that we have to be perfect and that we don’t walk around with scars and struggles. That would be an existential falsehood as we see star after star found dead under suspicious circumstances with open pill bottles and alcohol bottles by their bedside or as we hear of pastors committing suicide. The struggle is real but I wonder if we would cultivate a posture of blessing, what kind of impact that might have on others?

Look at what Jesus’ last priestly gesture does to the disciples. The blessing leads them to God, fills them with joy, and causes them to return blessings to God in worship. A blessing can be so contagious in someone’s life that they become a bless-er as well. Christ’s blessing at the end of his earthly life shows us how to live on earth. To live like Christ is to offer blessings, not cursings over others. We have enough cursings going on, enough hate happening, enough people playing god but where are the blessings? When will we as Christians act in a different way and bless somebody? “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.” The act of blessing helps you transition to a higher realm and takes you closer, nearer to the heart of God. This ethic of blessing is linked to the heavenly life.

*If I can help somebody, as I pass along,  
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,  
If I can show somebody, that he [she's] travelling wrong,  
Then my living shall not be in vain.*

*If I can do my duty, as a good man ought,  
If I can bring back beauty, to a world up wrought,  
If I can spread love's message, as the Master taught,  
Then my living shall not be in vain. (Alma Bazel Androzso)*

My living will not be in vain if I live in a way that blesses others. The call to bless is clear. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them”(Rom 12:14).

How do we want to end our lives, end our day, end our academic year, end our time in Page? What do we want to leave behind? Nothing can be gained from more cursing. And it’s not a coincidence that Jesus leads the disciples as far as Bethany before he ascends because Bethany is where he resurrected Lazarus. A blessing in that location tells me that a blessing can resurrect a dying soul. Go and bless someone today. It may be their only lifeline. The Lord bless you.