

AND YOU SHALL BE A BLESSING  
Joint Thanksgiving Service – First United Methodist Church  
November 23, 2010

Thank you, Dr. Bryan. It's such a joy to be able to share this magnificent pulpit with you, and to continue what has to be one of Montgomery's great, historic interfaith relationships. I was going through some old files a few months ago, and came across some Temple bulletins from the 1920's. And there, on the front page of one of those October bulletins, was the announcement of the upcoming annual interfaith Thanksgiving service! Who knows how old the tradition already was in those days?!

On a more personal level, I have to share with you how grateful I am to have Dr. Bryan as colleague, teacher, mentor and friend. His calls, ostensibly to ask for my take on some biblical text or some other matter, almost always become wide-ranging conversations, as we learn and teach and deepen our understanding and our friendship in equal measure.

I've also been able to work with Revs. Nathan Attwood and David Saliba on other interfaith programs, primarily through Interfaith Montgomery, and look forward to other such opportunities in the years ahead.

The primary theme of Thanksgiving is...*Thanksgiving*, but there is another theme, closely related, on which I would like to share some thoughts this evening – the theme of blessing. For no matter what our religious faith tradition might be, or even how we practice our religion in our own families at home, I suspect that nearly all of our Thanksgiving meals will begin with words of blessing – thanking the Almighty for the food we eat, the love we share, the friends and family who are with us and share their lives with us.

In Judaism, the blessing is the central unit of prayer. Scan any Jewish prayer book, and you will see that just about every paragraph begins or ends with a blessing. We recite blessings when we perform a ritual; celebrate a joyous occasion; ask God for healing; partake of the foods we eat and drink; express thanks, or sanctify a moment of mourning and loss. The tradition of reciting blessings at every opportunity is so strong in Judaism that Jewish law stipulates: "A person must pronounce at least one hundred benedictions daily." In the first code of Jewish law, compiled in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, there are 63 chapters; the very first one is the tractate on blessings.

Here's a brief excerpt from that passage on blessings, just to give you a flavor:

“If a person sees shooting stars, earthquakes, thunder, storms and lightning, he should say, ‘Blessed be He whose strength and might fill the world.’ If he sees mountains, hills, seas, rivers and deserts, he should say, ‘Blessed be He who brought about creation...’ For rain or for good tidings, a person should say, ‘Blessed be He who is good and does good.’ For evil tidings, he should say, ‘Blessed be the true judge...’”

When we first wake up each morning, we are to say a blessing of thanks for being able to see a new day, and we are taught blessings to say each night as we lie down to sleep.

I've always supposed that the rationale for having to recite a hundred blessings a day is the theory that if we spend all of our time finding opportunities for blessing, we won't have time to get into trouble! I recently learned, however, that if you count the curses that Moses lists for the Israelites in Deuteronomy that will befall them if they don't keep up with their end of the covenant, the number comes to exactly 1 hundred. I don't know anyone who actually counts 100 blessings a day, but doing so would sure give us a great sense of the universe beyond ourselves, and God's presence in our lives.

The Talmud, a Jewish legal commentary completed about 1,500 years ago, has a wonderful story about Rabbi Gamliel, who was caught saying a blessing upon seeing a beautiful woman. He said, “Praise to You, O God, Ruler of the universe, for creating beautiful things in the world.” His colleagues castigated him for looking. His answer was that he was just turning the corner and before he could avert his gaze, he had already enjoyed himself – and was therefore obligated to say the blessing. His colleagues excused him this time, but told him to be more careful in turning corners in the future!

Sometimes when I'm teaching a class, I'll ask students to think of the different ways we use blessings. The most obvious is the blessing that makes a request: “God, bless our country with peace”; “God, bless our football team with a win in the big game.” [I wonder which of those two is more common here in the South!]. I'll admit that the corollary troubles me – if our football team loses, does that mean our team is cursed? Or that the other team's prayers were more effective? – yet prayers and blessings of request are probably the most common. Then there are blessings of wonder: We see a rainbow, or look into the eyes of a loved one, and feel the blessing of the moment, even without words. And of course there are

blessings of thanks: Thank You, God, for this bountiful feast; Thank You, God, for seeing my last child safely off to college or career.

But there is yet another kind of blessing, perhaps the most important of all, and it is also perhaps the most ancient. It comes right at the beginning of the story of Abraham, when God says to Avram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, **And you shall be a blessing.**”

“And you shall be a blessing.”

What could that mean? We can understand asking for a blessing or bestowing a blessing, but to *be* a blessing?!

We learn several possibilities from our commentators. One says, “You shall be a blessing” means that people will bless by saying, “May God make you like Abraham.” Another teaches that God is not making a promise, but a command: “You **shall** be a blessing” in the sense that you must so live as to be a blessing to the world. Yet another says, “You shall be a blessing” means, “You will serve as the exemplar by which a blessing is invoked.”

My own take is that “You shall be a blessing” is God’s command that we devote our lives to social justice, economic justice and the highest standards of morality and ethics in everything we do. More than that: The command to live lives of righteousness is of crucial importance to who we are as human beings.

Another story in the Talmud illustrates this well:

R. Aha said in the name of R. Tanhum, son of R. Hiyya: Though a person has learned scripture and taught it, observed and performed it, yet if one was able to protest against wrongdoing and did not protest..., he is considered “cursed” as it is written, “Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this teaching.”

I see a direct corollary to the blessing of Abraham: If one who doesn’t protest against wrongdoing is cursed, then the one who is blessed **MUST** be the one who works to repair our broken world and share our blessings with all who are in need.

Sometimes after I preach I hear that rabbis should stick to religion and not speak from the pulpit about issues of the day. But living a life of blessing means

precisely involving ourselves in the ills of the world around us. Religion is not limited to an individual's concerns with prayer or how we celebrate our holidays; religion is concerned with what we owe to others, to people we might not even know at all. Working to right wrongs, and looking beyond ourselves, is a holy enterprise rooted in the nature of the relationship between God and humanity.

Maimonides, the great rabbinic codifier of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, wrote that our obligations to give charity and work towards social justice outweighed every other positive commandment. He wrote,

“It is our duty to be more careful in the performance of the commandment of charity than in that of any of the other positive commandments, for charity and righteousness are the mark of those who are of the seed of Abraham. True faith cannot stand up except through charity and righteousness.”

Living lives of righteousness – being a blessing – means more than just donating money to a good cause, important though that might be. But here I am talking about even more than that. How else is the oppressed to be relieved if not by judging the oppressor and crushing his ability to oppress? The toleration of injustice is the toleration of human suffering. The proud and the mighty do not, as a rule, yield to moral persuasion; responsibility for the sufferer demands that justice be done so that oppression be ended, and this means, inevitably, our personal, active participation in the political process, in grass roots action, in speaking up in ways that may make us uncomfortable but that show that our faith traditions have something to say about some of our most difficult issues.

When we proclaim “God is One,” what does that mean? For me, it can only mean that we must freshly appreciate and live out God's active care and concern for all human beings. Acting on that faith, we must devote ourselves to working with all people to make the oneness real.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means applying the ethical insights of the prophets to the specific social and political problems of our time. Such questions as civil rights, genocide, immigration, education reform, criminal justice, health care and many others have political aspects, but they involve ethical concepts on which religion must have something to say.

We profess to believe in principles of justice. God's command to Abram, right at the beginning of his career, instructs all of us that being a blessing is how we must live, what we must do, and what we must teach.

There is a saying attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, about 1,800 years ago: “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.” My friends, let us join together, and see what good we can do.

Amen