



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Bless you!

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 29, 2017

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on Matthew 11: 2-11

I don't know about you, but in the midst of all the grand changes and chances of political fortune these days, I've been having an acute sense of how powerless I feel, at least compared to the forces contending around me. I have been taking solace in reflecting on the power in my life that I do have, small but mighty, powers that I might have to improve the world.

And as I meditated on them, trying to make a list, I chuckled when I thought of one of the most powerful things a person can do: one of the most powerful things we can do is *sneeze*. Our entire body gets in on the act, expelling mist and fluids from our mouths at a mighty hundred miles an hour. That stuff, if we don't cover our mouths as we are taught as children, could travel thirty feet if we let it. It's an astonishing thing that we do, powerful, and yet another vexing aspect of our lives, for it is out of our control. We can never choose to do it. A sneeze, like so much in life, comes without warning at a time of its own choosing. It takes over, like some mischievous spirit playing us like a trumpet. Now, sometimes sneezes make sense. They come upon us after the seasons change or after opening a dusty book. But sometimes they don't. Sometimes they have a weird logic. Some people's sneezes always come in threes. Some people's sneezes burst when the sun shines upon them: we call that a photic sneeze.

What I don't appreciate are the indecisive sneezes. I've been teased by them upon occasion during sermons. And it's so embarrassing! For no reason, the sneeze makes you stop everything, open your mouth wide like a lion, and then it retreats. No sneeze. Just me making a weird face, and confusion all around.

If I were to sneeze in this pulpit, what would be the most polite thing for you to say? Yes! "God bless you." I've had a running debate with my wife, Megan, over whether saying "Bless you" is polite or actually superstitious. I had heard that the origin of the phrase was that a sneeze was thought to be so powerful that you could sneeze your soul out, and then the devil could snatch it away. And the blessing was a way to protect you from that. Well, I know that isn't how things work. And so I'm rather hesitant to encourage that line of thinking, as a priest.

But there are other origin explanations. One is that a sneeze meant that your heart was stopping, and the "bless you" was a kind of spiritual defibrillator. Another is that the sneezer is not long for this world, and they need a blessing for their last days. One that I like is that the sneezer is actually blessing everyone in the room with their sneeze, and the "bless you" is intended as a way to return the favor. The bottom line is that no one knows how it really started, but that it goes back at least two thousand years, to the time of Christ, who, like us, sneezed from time to time, although I've never seen a movie portray this reality.

I would contend that this is one of the most ubiquitous blessings in the world. Priestly blessings can't compete. And no matter its origin, at its root this practice is so gracious because it is an occasion to honor someone's presence. To recognize someone who is next to you, troubled by something out of their control, and in that disruption, to ask for God's blessing.

The close second to this blessing is when people say "Have a blessed day." This happens to me often, when I'm in a collar out and about. Passersby say it. Or retail workers say it to me with a conspiratorial glee, for they know I won't tattle-tale to corporate.

Both of these common, well-worn blessings are based on the firm conviction that if you are blessed, things are going well for you. And if they bless you, that things will be better in the future.

But the Gospels seriously undermine this bedrock conviction of people of goodwill and sincere faith. This is why the teachings of Jesus are so scandalous, if you dwell on them just a bit. Something as simple as the concept of divine blessing is thoroughly overturned and revealed to be something deeper than what is on the surface of our lives. Blessing for Jesus is definitively not good fortune. I remind you that, for the Romans, Fortune was a goddess, Lady Fortuna, who placed all of our lives upon her grand wheel. Like the Guys and Dolls characters sang over their dice, Luck was a Lady, and she was to be plied with prayers and offerings, and her blessing was to place us on higher spokes of the Wheel of Fortune. Life, wealth, health, victory, safety.

This is a grand tradition, spanning the ages and crossing the cultures. But Jesus comes at the start of his teaching ministry and calls us to a higher vision of what it means to be blessed. These "Beatitudes," as we call them, are the eight sayings that declare God's blessing in the most unexpected of circumstances. You heard them read earlier. Here is a paraphrase from the bold theologian Walter Wink:

"Do you want to know who will be blessed? Not the powerful ones with lots of money and weapons. No, the poor will be blessed. Not the ones who can shout the loudest and get their way. No, the meek will be blessed. Not the ones who kill their enemies. No, the ones who are persecuted for doing what is right. Not those who play it safe, but those who stand up for the sake of justice. Not the clever and the sly, but the pure in heart. Not those who make war. No, those who make peace."

So, he makes his vision clear from the start. If we want to be blessed, we must perceive and pursue a more robust sense of what being blessed" is. It is found in having a different model of success with a different set of heroes. It's found by taking on a new identity, an identity that is freely loyal, sensitive, and non-violent. This new identity brings with it new blessings that aren't "common sense." And Jesus promises we will pay a price for taking on this way of life. But he also promises that we will discover many prized, yet hidden, rewards. The Way of Christ abounds with blessings in disguise, doesn't it? After all, we are the ones who somehow summon the fortitude to call the day that Jesus was crucified "Good Friday." To see a blessing in that day is an extraordinary testimony that shakes the foundations of this world.

I do not mean that God wants us to be poor, sick, or suffering. But I do mean that none of those things precludes our being blessed. And there is the added layer that when we chose to follow Jesus' Way, our families, our friends and our communities may well be uncomfortable. They may well avoid us. It is no small thing to break with a way of life that is primarily toxic in character and begin to share in the life of communities where we are loved and cared for. The great tumult that comes with that transition could be a sign that we are blessed.

When others around us can only see winners and losers, or they are desperate to survive at any cost in uncertain times, and we find ourselves esteeming others first, other peoples first, and other nations first, we will be seen as foolish. That foolishness is a blessing. When those around us demand that we hate others or cut ourselves off from those who would dare attack and oppress us, and we are learning how to turn the other cheek and love our enemies, we will appear to others to be naive and a risk. When our brightest and best accumulate with anxiety in their accounts while we begin to give away our resources to feed the poor and pursue peace, we may be roundly criticized by many, perhaps even the majority. Jesus says as much. When we have sought to be reconciled even with the most obnoxious, spiteful people, when we seek justice and peace for all sorts, and when we grieve over hurting others, Jesus says that this, ALL THIS, is what it is to be blessed by God. What would it be like if you could rest in this reality?

So much of our lives, this unfolding present tense, full of colliding people, places, and things, so much of our world comes upon us like a sneeze, like a chilly front, or a roiling current: unbidden, unwanted, stirring up our souls and bodies with deep power and force. The history of this nation and this world is pulling us apart and pushing us together in reactive currents that are beyond our control. Yet, every time we bless each other, may we also remind ourselves of the true character of the blessing of God. May we never forget that none of those currents, which move where they will, none of them go deep enough to disturb the ground beneath that we all share, the ground of our being. The current on the surface can never sweep us away from the deep foundation of God's loving presence, which has its own indomitable and tectonic,

current. Drawing us, all of us, to a common home. Drawing us all to evermore see what is hidden beneath the surface of every person, the blessing of God.

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