

This is How You Bless People
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 22, 2019- PM Service
Rev. Peter Jonker
Numbers 6:22-27

Tonight we meditate on a piece of scripture you've probably heard recited more often than any other. The only other passages that could come close to competing for the title would be the Lord's Prayer or possibly 2 Corinthians 13:14. You've heard this piece of scripture so much because it is the blessing that ministers often use when they close their service. The minister raises his or her hands and pronounces the familiar words at our passage's center. Let's read the passage. (Numbers 6:22-27) While we frequently hear these words in church, I don't think we often hear a sermon on them, so as I ruminated about what to preach on tonight, I thought why not preach on the Aaronic blessing—which is the name of the blessing God teaches Aaron and his fellow priests in our passage. Sometimes the most familiar words contain unforeseen treasures. Based on my study I would like to share with you 5 different things I've discovered about this blessing as I've studied it this week. Some of these observations will just be interesting facts; some of them will be a word about what it means to be God's children in His world.

First thing: the words of this blessing are a perfect little piece of poetry. They are lovely in English, but when you go to the Hebrew, you really sense the artistry. The blessing has three lines. The first line is 3 words in the Hebrew, the second line has 5 words in the Hebrew, the third line has 7 words in the Hebrew. So there's a steady buildup to the last line which not only ends with the word peace, but has 7 words which as you know is the number of fullness and completion. That's not all. When you count the letters in each line of the blessing there are 15 Hebrew letters in line one, there are 20 Hebrew letters in line two, and then there are 25 Hebrew letters in line three. 15-20-25 – the symmetry continues. Wait, there's more: if you count the syllables in each line of the poetry there is 12 syllables in line one, 14 in line 2 and 16 in line three. Obviously these words are carefully chosen. This careful mathematical precision of the blessing gives it a kind of crescendo effect. The blessing builds in intensity with each line and then resolves into the word peace. Even in the English translation you lose all the precise symmetry but when you hear the benediction pronounced you get a sense of the crescendo and the resolution.

Second thing: this blessing has been centrally important to God's people for a long, long time. In 1979 archaeologists were working in the Hinnom valley just outside of old Jerusalem. They unearthed two small amulets made of silver leaf. These amulets had been pierced so that a chain could be attached and the owner could wear it like an ancient locket. Scratched onto the surface of the amulets were words from this passage, words from this blessing. The lockets dated from the 7th century BC. That means that they pre-dated the

Babylonian exile. They are some of the oldest examples of a Bible citation or a Bible quote ever found! So right from the very beginning this blessing was beloved, so beloved that some people wore it close to their heart.

Which brings us to the third thing, and that's the content of the blessing itself. In the Old Testament and in the rest of Scripture, giving someone a blessing was more than wishing them well. A blessing made something happen. A blessing passed on a real spiritual content to another person. When you blessed someone, you gave them Spiritual food. Think of the blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob. It gave something to Jacob. It actually passed on to him the right of the firstborn child. So it is with this blessing. When the priest raised his hands and spoke these words to the people, it wasn't just sound passing into their ear, it was Spiritual food pressing into their heart.

What exactly passed into the heart of the people when the priest blessed them with these words? Let's look. The Lord is the subject of each of the three lines of the blessing, and each line also has a pair of verbs. So each line tells us two things that God does for us. What are those actions? In the first line he blesses and keeps us. Those two words together are a pledge that the Lord will keep us safe, that his hold on us will not be broken. The word 'keep' is the same root word that we find in Psalm 121 which is sometimes translated as "the keeper of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." God will guard us. That doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen to us; it does mean that in the middle of the storm the Lord's hand will be on our shoulder and he will not let go.

Line two says that the Lord will make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. That builds on line one, in that it tells us that the keeper of Israel is more than a stern-faced bodyguard. He's not a hired hand who doesn't care about the ones he's keeping. He loves the flock under his care! His face shines when he sees us. His care is not motivated by duty, but by love, and that love spills over into a grace that gives us more than we deserve.

Finally, in line three, God turns his face towards us and gives us peace. You've probably heard this one translated as lift up his countenance upon you. The second line promises that God's face will shine when he sees us, the third line promises that God will *turn* his face. The Hebrew word 'turn' has a sense of burden, the sense of carrying something. So the turning of God's face implies that God will allow himself to be troubled on our behalf. He will turn towards us even if that is painful for him. There's a note of sacrifice on our behalf. From our New Testament perspective, we might even say that the God who turns his face towards us in this blessing will become the God who lets his face be spit upon and crucified for us and for our salvation. This blessing points towards the one who will raise his hands over us on the cross so that we can have peace.

All of the richness of God's love for us is in this blessing. Maybe that's why he sums up the power of the blessing the way He does in verse 27. When the priests bless the people with these words, "*they will put my name on them and I will bless them.*" This blessing puts God's name on the Israelites. This blessing puts God's name on us. God tells us that these words are not just words

that we hear with our ears. With these words, the God presses his name onto our hearts.

In the Jewish tradition, this blessing pronounced at the end of the service of morning prayer. So, just before the people got up to go to work, before they go out to face the stuff of their day - the sorrows and the temptations - the priest would raise his hands over the congregation and speak this blessing. In many synagogues, as he speaks the words of the blessing, the priest holds his hands like this: (shin symbol). Why like this? This is the letter shin. It's a letter in the Hebrew alphabet that kind of looks like a lopsided w. Why does the priest bless with his hand in the shape of a shin? Because it is the first letter in the word Shem, which is the Hebrew words for name. The shape of his hands reminds the worshipper than as they are being blessed, the Lord is putting his name on them. There is something beautiful about this picture. God's people gather for morning prayers. Their hearts are full of the anxieties that fill all of us at the beginning of our days. The priest raises his hands over the anxious people, and God says to them, *"I know you are about to go out into a hard world. A world full to trials and terrible things. Don't be afraid. My hand is on you. My face is turned toward you. And my name is on your heart."*

Fourth thing. Blessing is something we can do for each other, especially when we are dealing with people and situations where we don't know what to say or what to do. A good number of you have probably read the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. It's a beautiful novel. The main character is an aging preacher named John Ames and the book is written in his voice. Robinson writes it as a memoir he writes for his young son.

Much of the worry in the book centers around Reverend Ames' godson Jack. Jack is the son of his best friend and John has pledged to look after the boy. It turns out to be a chore. Jack is a difficult child. He torments Reverend Ames. He sets his mailbox on fire. He paints his front steps with a coat of molasses. He was constantly doing what Reverend Ames called "mischief bordering on harm." All his pranks had an edge. As a young adult the mischief became more serious. Stealing booze. Joyriding. Finally, he gets a girl pregnant and then abandons her by skipping town.

Eventually Jack comes back to town, and Reverend Ames tries to connect with his godchild, but it never seems to work. Sometimes the boy seems ready to listen and sometimes he holds the old man at arm's length, and sometimes Reverend Ames realizes that his own anger at the boy, his own resentment is keeping him from loving the boy properly. Finally, the time comes for Jack to leave town again and Reverend Ames offers to bring him to the bus station. The two men end up sitting together on a bench at the bus station making awkward conversation as they wait for the bus. Here's what happens. This is Reverend Ames' voice.

"I didn't know how to continue the conversation...but I didn't want to leave him, and in any case I had to sit down on the bench beside him on account

of my heart. So there we were. I said “If you would accept a few dollars of that money of mine, you’d be doing me a kindness.”

He laughed and said, “I suppose I could see my way clear.”

So I gave him forty dollars and he kept twenty and gave twenty back. We sat there for a while.

Then I said, the thing I would like, actually, is to bless you.”

He shrugged. “What would that involve?”

“Well as I envisage it, it would involve placing my hand on your brow and asking the protection of God for you. But if it would be embarrassing...” There were a few people on the street.

“No, No, No! He said, that doesn’t matter.”

And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him, to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers of course –

“The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious to thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace.”

Nothing could be more beautiful than that or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient for that matter.

Then, when he did not open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, “Lord bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved Son and brother and husband and father.”

Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream.”

This is such a beautiful scene and it reminds me of the power of blessing. When we have people in our life and we don’t know what to say to them and more, or what to do for them, when we don’t even know how to pray for them anymore, we can bless them. It’s a little different than prayer, or maybe it’s a different kind of prayer. We can remind them of the name that is on their heart and place them in God’s hands.

Final thing I want to say about blessing. I want to take us to the end of the gospel of Luke. Remember how the gospel of Luke ends? The risen Jesus meets with his disciples in the vicinity of Bethany and as he meets with them he is lifted up into heaven before them. Do you remember what he does as he’s lifted up? Luke tells us that he raises his arms and blesses his disciples. Luke doesn’t tell us the words of that blessing. *What words do you think they were?* What words do you think our Great High Priest chose to speak to the disciples as they went out on their own to face the challenges of life, what words did he pronounce over all his disciples who would follow these 12? What words do you think he chose to pronounce over all the ordinary people from every tribe and nation who would go out into the world bearing his name? It had to be this blessing didn’t it? It had to be these old words. And in so doing our heavenly high priest said to those disciples what he says to us every morning: *“I Bless you and keep you. I make my face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. I turn my face toward you and give you peace.”*

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