

1 Sermon, February 13, 2011

Texts: 2 Kings 4:8-7, 16-37; Psalm 67:1-7

Title: "God Bless You!"

1. What does it mean to truly give a blessing?
 - a. More than thankfulness
 - b. Words carry power
 - c. Something is conveyed
2. How do we help God convey a blessing?
3. What do we mean when we say, "God Bless You"?

1. What does it mean to truly give a blessing?

We may often say, "God bless you." But what does it mean to truly give a blessing?

a. More than thankfulness

Psalm 67 speaks of God's blessing:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that God's way might be known upon earth, God's saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The psalm praises God for a bountiful harvest. So it is clear that we can thank God for sustaining us.

The psalm asks that God's face might shine upon us; God might smile on us. It might seem kind of a quaint way to put it, but the people who wrote the psalms believed that if God looked on you favorably — God's face was turned toward you in a good way — there was power in God's mere glance.

God's smile had *power*.

It's hard for us to understand it; we modern people think about the universe in a different way. But the Biblical understanding was that God did have a face. You couldn't look upon God's face and live, so you couldn't see God's expression. But if good things were happening, God was literally smiling on you. Some kind of power was conveyed by God's smile.

b. Words carry power

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In a similar way, the Biblical understanding was that words carry power. We may think of words as carriers of meaning; people of the Bible believed that words carried power, too.

A spoken blessing would not return empty.

Maybe you can think of it best if you think about what it means to withhold a blessing. When you withhold a blessing, it is not just a matter of not speaking words. It is a matter of withholding approval of someone or some cause.

When you withhold a blessing, you are keeping power for yourself, not giving it away freely.

Blessings are spoken, but more than just words are conveyed.

c. Something is conveyed

Do you remember the story of Isaac blessing Jacob?

Isaac was supposed to bless his older child, Esau, who was hairy. Isaac was blind, and at his mother's urging, Jacob wore something furry when he went and asked for his father's blessing. Isaac was tricked into giving his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau.

Esau got angry and threatened to kill his brother.

Why was it such a big deal?

Because a blessing was more than words. It conveyed power. In blessing Jacob, Isaac gave some of himself to his son. It was not just the inheritance. It was seen as something more than that.

And what about the inexplicable behavior of the woman from Shunem?

In today's reading, we see that the prophet Elisha was grateful to this woman who often put him up in their extra room. So he blessed her. He blessed her that she might have a son, and she did.

Some years later, when the boy was at least old enough to speak, he got a pain in the head, and died suddenly. Then what did the woman do? She shut her son's body up in the spare room, told her husband everything was OK, and rode a donkey as fast as she could for Elisha.

When Elisha's servant asked her what was the matter, she lied again and said everything was OK. But when she came to Elisha himself, she confronted him. "Why did you bless me with a son if it was only to have him die at this young age?"

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When Elisha sent his servant Gehazi away with his staff to lay upon the boy, the woman waited, and would not leave until Elijah himself accompanied her to her home. Then Elisha lay on the boy and healed him.

How strange, we think. Why would this woman lie both to her husband and to Elisha's servant Gehazi?

Well, two explanations come to mind, and both of them indicate how words were seen to have power.

First, she didn't want to speak of her son's death out loud, because that would only confirm it. If she said that he was dead, he would indeed be dead, and there might be nothing that could be done for him.

Second, the child had been born because of a blessing by Elisha. The woman from Shunem wanted to hold Elisha to his word. She wanted him to keep his blessing and restore her son to life. She needed Elisha in person, because it was his word, his blessing that had been responsible, and might even now have effect.

Now the woman's strange actions in locking her dead son away and not telling the truth and running to Elisha all make sense. She wanted nothing in between her son and Elisha's blessing. She wanted no one else to come to see her son before Elisha did.

2. How do we help God convey a blessing?

All of this background lets us know that when we convey a blessing, something happens. We may not look at it in quite the same way as they did in Bible times, but we can see that a blessing has power.

We see that when we wish God's blessings on someone or something, something happens. We can become a conduit for God's work through our words and our prayers.

Some years ago, Gary Smalley and John Trent wrote a little book called "The Blessing." In that book, Smalley and Trent talked about how important it was for a parent to convey a blessing to a child. The authors said that many adults never received a parental blessing, and

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they still long to receive it. A parental blessing somehow completes the child-raising and enables the child to become an adult who is confident that he or she is loved and capable.

3. What do we mean when we say, "God Bless You"?

So, what do we mean when we say, "God bless you"?

When someone sneezes, we often say it, but what do we mean?

Historians disagree about the origin of saying "God bless you" when people sneeze. It could be that the sneeze was seen as a sign of bubonic plague, so a blessing was needed for healing. Or it could be that a sneeze was seen as a spirit coming out of someone, making that person more vulnerable, so a prayer was in order.

It doesn't hurt to ask God's blessing on someone when they sneeze, but it shouldn't be the only time we ask for God's blessing on someone else.

I like it when Roger says, "God Bless you!"

Words still have power. Maybe not like the ancients thought they did. But when we wish someone God's blessing, it does make a difference.

We know God blesses. Let's let others know about it. Amen.

Saint Blaise – two crossed candles are used for the blessing of throats on the feast day of Blaise, which falls on February 3rd, the day after Candlemas on the Roman Catholic calendar of saints. Blaise is traditionally believed to intercede in cases of throat illnesses, especially for fish-bones stuck in the throat.