

## ANTICIPATING BLESSINGS

10/20/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 24 (C): Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; Luke 18:1-8

I wonder if you've ever heard of the idea of "anticipating blessings." The idea is that when you're anticipating blessings, you begin to see them all around you. For instance, on Friday—my day off—I had to stay at home, all afternoon, because a plumber was going to show up between noon and five. He arrived about three, but the job took him till a little after five, so I had to sit there...all afternoon. And, I have to tell you, those five hours were a blessing! I caught-up on personal email, read a book, and played with my cat.

I started thinking about "anticipating blessings" earlier in the week when a group of us used an app called "d365". You might have seen my recommendation of it late this summer. It's a daily devotion app which provides a Bible verse or two, and then a series of very short reflections to: Pause, Listen, Think, Pray, and Go. Some of the comments the group made really stuck with me—especially in light of our season of "Be the Light" here at St. Andrew's.

The bible story the app focused on that day was about Jacob wrestling with a divine being all night long. Even though Jacob first thought it was another human, before releasing his wrestling partner, Jacob demands a blessing. As he receives his blessing, God reveals it's been God Jacob was wrestling with all along.

When we spin that out, we realize that through all the challenges and tribulations in life, while it can feel like we're wrestling with God, it's God who is with us, accompanying us through those hard times. The author of the app explains it this way: "It's easier to look at tough situations in life only as conditions to survive; it takes intention and practice to look for growth opportunities...we can learn from Jacob to keep wrestling with whatever it is that troubles us until God blesses us."

That sounds a lot like the widow in this morning's Gospel reading, doesn't it? She keeps bothering the judge—demanding justice—until, finally, the judge decides it'll be easier to give her what she wants. Now, when we first encounter such scripture, it's important to remember that, when the Gospel authors indicate that Jesus said something, it's not necessarily a direct quote of Jesus.

More often, it's a remembering one of the apostles had about what Jesus taught them. Even more so, scholars estimate that these stories were written down about 60 years after the death of Jesus, so the authors were likely not reporting what they heard Jesus say, but what the apostles, in whose honor the stories are dedicated, shared with them about what Jesus had said.

On top of that, each Gospel was written to engage a very specific community. We can only assume that the Lukan community would have been experienced in using parables as a teaching technique. Additionally, people of the early church were frustrated they still hadn't experienced the second coming of Christ in the way they understood it would be happening.

So, here they are, a couple generations after the death of Jesus, not only frustrated by not yet encountering the second coming of Christ, but getting lazy about their spiritual discipline. Which is why the Lukan teacher, says, "Let me remind you what Jesus said about praying continuously and not losing heart."

To do so, the “parable of the bothersome woman” is shared. Which is what we really should call it, instead of the “parable of the unjust judge”, because it’s not the judge that this parable is about. While this is the first of two weeks of parables that appear to be about prayer, this one is really more about us expecting our blessing.

Rather than two different viewpoints on prayer, the two, back-to-back passages in Luke provide us different entry points to wrestle with our faith. Which, of course, is the point of a parable. In some ways, a parable is like a poem, in that it can reveal things that can’t be explained in a literal fashion. There are metaphors, similes, and analogies that get made that expand our thinking.

So, the persistent widow is paired up with a judge, who, we are told “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” In other words, he was not a good person. What’s also curious to me is that a month ago we heard about the dishonest manager, and today we have the unjust judge. As soon as we begin to wonder why the least likely role models are held-up as examples, that’s our clue to dig deeper.

If it was simply that the widow’s bothering of the judge eventually wore him down, then we could make the mistake of equating God to an unjust judge. The actual message to the Lukan community—to us—is to never give up! We should keep praying, because, if even a low-life, like the unjust judge, grants justice—although he doesn’t love or even respect people—then, surely, our God, who loves us unconditionally, will bring justice into our lives.

At the same time, the story of Jacob and this parable point out that our relationship with God is one of mutuality. God doesn’t just hand-over love, justice, and mercy, rather we have to be willing to receive God’s grace. And sometimes, from our perspective, it can feel like we have to demand the blessing.

That is one theology of prayer: that both parties—the listener and the speaker, on whichever side we are, at any given time—are mutually benefited and affected by the relationship. That isn’t to say that we have to convince God of our needs, but that, in bringing our needs to God, God is affected; just as we are affected. The widow was certainly shaped by her ongoing actions, which finally changed the judge’s decision, and the judge was surely transformed in some small way as well.

The author of the d365 app writes: “You’d think Jacob would see the futility of a never-ending struggle and just give up...But no! Jacob is convinced that even a difficult, drawn out, painful scuffle like this will result...in a divine blessing. Like Jacob, one way that we can practice hope is to anticipate blessing.” Don’t you love that? “One way that we can practice hope is to anticipate blessing.”

One person in our meeting that day shared that that’s exactly how he experienced a recent series of very serious cardiac procedures. He explained how he and his wife decided they could either become frozen in fear that he might die, or spend their time looking for the blessings to demonstrate their hope.

They celebrated, for example, that they received the news of his cardiac condition before they left for the international vacation they had planned. “Through the whole thing,” he told us, “I just went into every procedure anticipating a blessing. And a blessing is what I got.”

We might not receive the kind of blessing we think we want. Maybe the blessing will take the shape of a wise counselor, or a friend who lends an ear. The blessing might show up in a class teaching a new spiritual discipline that lowers one's blood pressure. These blessings, of course, are helpful to us, personally, but they also have a positive effect on the world around us. Like I said, I was inspired by listening to my friend talk about how he experienced anticipating a blessing. That is exactly what we mean, by "Being the Light" in the world.

So that takes us from the unjust judge to the persistent woman, and the blessing she finally receives in the form of justice. Then, without warning, the passage ends abruptly with advice in the form of a question. As the author assures us that God will lovingly respond and that God won't delay, the people are simultaneously asked: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The author is concerned that the people not forget that this relationship of mutuality requires their faith. In other words, we all want God's grace, but are we doing the things that demonstrate we have faith: praying, making alms, being the light in the world?

Since this morning's video highlighted our Outreach ministries, I want you to know that if you encountered any blessings in your life lately, just come help out at one of these programs, and I guarantee you will walk away feeling the presence of the Spirit...feeling blessed.

And, it's not about what we can do for "them". It's about the relationships that develop because we are all a part of this same loving community at St. Andrew's. Those receiving become the blessing, and those serving become the receivers.

Let me tell you about Matthew. Matthew not only comes to receive food and take a shower on our campus, he helps set-up, and sees himself as one of us. One night, for instance, he spent the night in our parking lot protecting an overabundance of canned goods, that had been delivered to us, until the food could be put in a temporary storage unit.

This past week, he came into the office to let us know he'd been picking-up garbage on our campus. Now, I think of doing that almost daily, but the most I seem to ever get done is picking-up a candy wrapper close to my car. But Matthew took it a step further. He requested that we buy one of those trash-grabber tools so that he could reach the junk way back in the depth of the hedges. Matthew's love of his St. Andrew's home was a blessing to me in the midst of a challenging week.

So, as we move through this season of "Being the Light" in the world, what might it look like in your own life to walk around anticipating blessings?

-AMEN

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

### **Jeremiah 31:27-34**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

### **Psalms 119:97-104**

- 97 Oh, how I love your law! \*  
all the day long it is in my mind.
- 98 Your commandment has made me wiser than my enemies, \*  
and it is always with me.
- 99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, \*  
for your decrees are my study.
- 100 I am wiser than the elders, \*  
because I observe your commandments.
- 101 I restrain my feet from every evil way, \*  
that I may keep your word.
- 102 I do not shrink from your judgments, \*  
because you yourself have taught me.
- 103 How sweet are your words to my taste! \*  
they are sweeter than honey to my mouth.
- 104 Through your commandments I gain understanding; \*  
therefore I hate every lying way.

### **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**

~~As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.~~

~~In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.~~

### **Luke 18:1-8**

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"