

St. Paul's, Concord  
October 20 & 21, 2018  
Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45  
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I was in a thrift store a while back, looking through some books that were displayed right next to the counter. There was a young man on duty at the cash register, and I noticed him helping an elderly woman with some items she was donating. First she lifted a medium-sized dog bed onto the counter, and then, one by one, she took out the things she'd put inside it. There was a fleece dog coat, a collar and leash, some food and water bowls, and several toys and balls.

I heard the woman say that, since the 1950s, she'd always had two dogs, an older one and a young one – but that her last dog was her only one and he had recently “died on the lawn.”

“Oh, I'm SO sorry!” the young man said to her. “You must be very sad.” The woman agreed that she was – and it was obvious in any case because she had tears in her eyes. The man took the woman's hands and told her how much *he'd* suffered when his family's dog had died recently and what an empty place it had left in his heart. But he said he was getting used to the dog's absence. The two of them continued to talk about how important our pets are to us and how much joy they bring into our lives. Gradually the woman brightened up and, as she left the store, the young man said, “I hope you feel better soon.” She thanked him and told him how much she appreciated his concern.

What I witnessed that day was a blessing. The young man didn't say the words, “God bless you;” he didn't make the sign of the cross – in fact there was no mention at all of religion. But the grieving woman *was* blessed. She was blessed by a stranger who took the time to listen to her story, to connect with her pain, and to give her hope.

Today we come to step five in our Way of Love series. We've talked about the act of turning, or *returning* to Christ, about taking time to learn, delving more deeply into the treasures of scripture; we've explored the sustaining power of prayer and we've been reminded of how essential it is to gather as a worshipping community. Each of those four steps plays an important part in preparing us for the fifth step of the Way of Love: Bless – which is defined as “sharing faith and unselfishly giving and serving.” (Episcopal Church *Way of Love* webpage)

An important aspect of the act of turning to God, is recognizing how generous God is with compassion and forgiveness. Then, as we focus on learning, we grow in understanding of how that loving acceptance was expressed through Jesus during his ministry on earth. Our personal commitment to prayer helps us discern where God may be calling or guiding us to be agents of that same loving service, and the time we spend worshipping with our parish family nourishes our spirits and reminds us that, as members of the Body of Christ, we are never alone.

From the earliest days of the Jesus Movement, Jesus has been calling his disciples to “give, forgive, teach, and heal in his name.” The Way of Love resources remind us that, as disciples, “we are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions.” (Episcopal Church *Way of Love* webpage)

One of the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant is to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” (*Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 305) And that is what we’re doing when we’re intentional about blessing the people we encounter in our daily lives.

In our gospel passage, James and John have a request for Jesus: when he enters into his glory, they want to be given the seats of honor on either side of his throne. What could have put an idea like that into their heads?

Here’s what Jesus had been saying to them, in the verses that come just before today’s reading:

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” (Mark 10:33-34)

This was the third time that Jesus had predicted his arrest and death and resurrection to his friends. The first time was right after Peter identified him as the Messiah (Mark 8:31); the second time was shortly after the Transfiguration (Mark 9:31). And now, as he and his friends are heading for the place where he knows his execution will take place, he tells them in even greater detail about the suffering he will undergo.

And out of all that Jesus told them, what was it that stuck most in the minds of his friends? Was it his arrest and death sentence by the religious leaders? Was it his being handed over to the Gentiles? Was it the mocking and the indignities that would be heaped upon him? The flogging he would endure? Was it his horrible death? No, what struck James and John most was that Jesus would rise again on the third day. It’s his resurrection that they latched onto, and in particular, the glory that is to come in heaven. That’s why, after hearing this stunning prediction for the third and last time, the two brothers brought him their request for special treatment.

It seems as though James and John were in denial, that they weren’t able to face the reality of Jesus’ suffering and death. And the way they expressed this was by concentrating on the glory instead of focusing on the cross. And sometimes *we* can fall into a similar trap.

We know that Jesus suffered and died in order to give us life. There’s a powerful reminder of that in the letter to the Hebrews, which describes how “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death...” that he “learned obedience through what he suffered...” and that “he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” (Hebrews 5:7-9) So we know that our salvation comes at a cost – and that makes it all the more precious.

The reality is that the Christian life is much more like the ‘pre-glory’ years – the time leading up to the crucifixion, and the challenges Jesus faced before his death and resurrection. Our own journeys aren’t all that different from the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. We have our own struggles, our own bouts with illness and injury, depression, fear, anger and doubt. We all suffer loss, broken relationships, and disappointments.

As people of faith called to bless, we have to remember that the people around us carry similar burdens of suffering, disappointment, and loss. Like the woman in the thrift store who'd lost her beloved dog, our fellow human beings are struggling too. And when we put aside our selfish desires, when we focus on the reality of life in this broken world, we can discover in ourselves the ability to make it a little bit better.

Matthew's gospel reminds us that we've received much from God, at no cost to ourselves, and so we have a responsibility to give to others without expecting payment. (Matthew 10:8) In other words, we have been blessed and we are called to be a blessing.

I remember serving in a parish that had gone through a traumatic time before I arrived as Interim Priest. From my very first day I had a sense of something missing, something not quite right. And then I realized what it was. Time and again, when a parishioner came into the building, it was with an attitude of "What can I get?", "What's in this for me?" As members of a healthy and active parish, here at St. Paul's you'll be more familiar with the attitude of "What can I contribute?", "Where are the needs that I can best meet with my particular gifts?", "How can I be a blessing?"

But the members of that traumatized parish simply weren't capable of blessing others. They needed time to be fed and encouraged and healed; they needed time to be blessed. And, gradually, that's what happened. The parish came back to life as its people opened themselves up to God to be restored – and by the time the new rector was called, folks were blessing all over the place!

How do we bless here at St. Paul's? I can give you lots of examples but here are just a few: It isn't just that we provide shelter and food to homeless families, it's that we spend time with those families, listening to their stories, reading to their children, encouraging, respecting, and uplifting them.

It isn't just that we give out food in our pantry, or clothing in our thrift shop, it's that we treat each client with the respect and courtesy they deserve as fellow children of God.

It isn't just that we take flowers and Communion to people in the hospital, it's that we spend time with those who are suffering: hearing, comforting, and reassuring them.

And each one of us can take those acts of blessing even further into the world around us. We don't have to make the sign of the cross, we don't even have to say the words "God bless you," we just have to pay attention to the people we meet so we know just what to say and do to be a blessing to them. In the words of Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world."