

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 23, 2008

There's been an old song from my youth running around in my head as I think about blessings and what it means to count them. If you remember this old song and feel like singing, please join me. And if you don't know it, let us sing it to you. Let's not worry about the language----the basic idea is pretty good!

*"When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
count your many blessings, name them one by one,
and it will surprise you what the lord has done.
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done,
Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your many blessings, see what God has done."*

If I were writing this old song nowadays, I'd probably substitute the idea of "the Universe" or "Higher Power" or "Nature" for the words Lord and God, but the idea of blessings being numerous and outweighing the discouragements and storms of life is a universal one----we are blessed with life, no matter how hard it is at times.

Our reading today has reminded us of our friends and their place in our lives. Our mates, our homes, our kids, our many joys---these are all countable blessings which are pretty stable most of the time. They represent the Great Fullness of our lives. I'd like to invite us to take a moment of silence and reflect upon the many blessings we can count. Close your eyes, if that's comfortable for you, and spend a few moments thinking about those many blessings and experience the Great Fullness of your life.

(1 minute or so of silence)

But blessings aren't always so obvious, are they? It has been a hard year so far, with financial and corporate meltdowns requiring drastic decisions on the part of our leaders, with election rhetoric heating up the airwaves and recriminations flying back and forth between politicians, with job loss looming for many folks, and even on our snug little island, the double threat of homelessness and hunger has become more and more obvious, even among our friends and family.

With the election over and our blood pressure beginning to subside as plans for the new administration seem to promise positive changes, as we pledge our support to a new vision for America---whether or not we voted for this new President---we are well aware that what may seem like a blessing to some of us may feel like a fearful event to others.

Hence the expression, "mixed blessing"! We can't be sure what is in store with any course of action. Is it right to bail out the Big Three car companies and thus save jobs or should tough love prevail and force them into bankruptcy or to make promises about what they will do with the money? Nobody knows for sure---each possible solution has its pros and cons.

Many times we can't know whether events are a blessing or a curse. There's an old story along this line that you may have heard.

A man has served as the Emperor's chef for years and is given a plot of land for a farm as a "Thank You" for noble service rendered to the Emperor. The man's friends all say, "What good luck, You have been truly blessed." But the man replies, "It may be good, it may be bad, it's too soon to tell."

The man goes out to see the property and finds that it is literally covered with rocks. His friends say, "What bad luck, you have been cursed and not blessed, with this land." The man replies, "It may be bad, it may be good. It's too soon to tell."

The man is working in the field with his team of oxen. A passerby notes that having a team of oxen is quite good fortune for a man clearing a field. The man replies, "It may be good, it may be bad. It's too soon to tell."

A few days later the ox team goes unexpectedly lame and the same passerby observes the bad fortune of the beasts' condition. The man replies, "It may be bad, it may be good. It's too soon to tell."

Without the ox team to help him, the man gets his only son into the field to help him clear the stumps and rocks. A friend drops by and observes that, "You are truly blessed to have such a strong son to help you in the field." The man replies, "It may be good, it may be bad. It's too soon to tell."

One day not long after this conversation, a large stone falls on the son, breaking his leg. Someone observes, "What bad luck has befallen you now that your son can no longer help with this hard work." The man replies, "It may be bad, it may be good. It's too soon to tell."

Before long, a terrible time of war befalls the country and all the able bodied young men are forced into the Emperor's army. Someone whose son has been drafted into service observes the good luck of the farmer whose son is still at his side since his broken leg made it impossible for him to fight. The man replies, "It may be good, it may be bad. It's too soon to tell."

Things go badly during the war and the emperor is overthrown. The new emperor takes back the gift of land that was given to the man, forcing him to return to the palace as a lowly cook. His friends observe the ill fate of having lost his farm to the new emperor. The man simply replies, "It may be bad, it may be good. It's too soon to tell."

So, though the unsettling and exciting events of the past months have got us all up in the air with both gladness and anxiety, as the man in our story has said, "It may be good, it may be bad. It's too soon to tell." Blessings come in unexpected places, at unexpected times. And sometimes they look like a curse at first.

Another way to express the idea of being blessed is the word "Grace". Grace means undeserved good fortune. It means Mercy. It means Kindness, Love, Forgiveness, Compassion, Reprieve, Thanksgiving. And we experience it most deeply when we are aware that we have done little to deserve it.

For me, sometimes the moment I dread is the moment that has the greatest gift within it: the phone call I stew about when the unexpected outcome is a new idea and a new direction; the outreach to an opponent which turns the enemy into a friend; the scary experience that becomes a passion.

I remember, when I was active in a twelve-step program, that I heard repeatedly the idea that "addiction has been the best thing that ever happened to me." By this startling phrase, the person meant that the addiction, whether to a substance or to food or to spending or to unhealthy relationships, had caused him or her to bottom out, to hit the last of his or her reserves, had forced him or her to seek help.

Blessings sometimes look like a curse at first, as they did to me when I learned during my first pastorate down in Portland that several people in the congregation had decided they wanted me to leave. But dealing with this upsetting event became a challenge that forced me to grow immeasurably. And now I can see it as a blessing---in disguise.

Let's take another moment for some silence. And in that silence, let's reflect privately, each of us, on the unexpected blessings of life, the times when a bad thing turned out to be a good thing. These too are part of the Great Fullness of life.

(1 minute or more, use chime)

There's a third kind of blessing that is important to note, because it is inherent in our congregational mission. It can be misunderstood, as giving a blessing is often considered to be the duty and privilege of the clergy. But in our faith tradition, giving blessing is not limited to those who wear vestments or quote the holy books or officiate at religious ceremonies.

Blessing is something we all can do for one another---and for the world. The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry has written this poetic challenge to us as Unitarian Universalists:

Choose to Bless the World

*Your gifts-whatever you discover them to be-
Can be used to bless or curse the world.*

*The mind's power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing,
Waiting*

*Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,*

*Do the work of justice
Or offer love.*

*Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.*

*You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?*

Choose to bless the world.

*The choice to bless the world
Can take you into solitude
To search for the sources
Of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing and liberation.*

*More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth,
Its chorus of life
Welcoming you.*

*None of us alone can save the world.
Together-that is another possibility,
Waiting.*

Within this challenge there are two opportunities---one is to discover and acknowledge the gifts, the blessings we have within us, the blessings which give us power and experience. The writer Frederick Buechner has spoken of that place where our "deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Let's go back together into a place of silence and consider what are the gifts we have within us as individuals, the blessings which give us something valuable to offer to the world. (1 min, chime)

And now, staying in the silence, let's consider where our deep gladness, the joy that comes from the blessings we have found, meets the world's deep need. (1 min, chime)

Let me read Rebecca Parker's words again as we think about our gifts and how we might choose to bless the world.

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Let's remain in silence for a few moments, considering the Great Fullness of our lives.

As we sing our closing hymn, savoring the community we are, let us prepare to bless the world.

#347, "Gather the Spirit"

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world, our blessing of the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our gifts, whatever we discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world. May we use our gifts to heal and not to harm, to bless and not to curse, to find the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.