

The first reading contains a popular blessing that Jewish and Christian people frequently use. Remember how it went? “The LORD bless you and keep you!” and so on. Have you ever wondered what a blessing is, anyway? We use the term so often, even in secular contexts, that its real meaning may have become obscured.

Superficially, blessings can sound like a wish or some other form of greeting card sentimentality. As you know, familiarity breeds contempt, and repetition invites indifference. Exploring blessings in depth reveals much more than familiarity or repetition might trick us into believing. Let’s take a look.

At the simplest level, a blessing is a request that goodness be directed towards someone or something, or perhaps towards an action we’re about to undertake. We can bless just about anything, from people to pets, houses, sneezes, your new Mercedes-Benz, vacations and even meetings. Sometimes we even bless God, as we do in the Divine Praises. Blessings then, are all about offering, requesting or acknowledging goodness.

Let’s take a humble example and consider what you did when you came into church just a few minutes ago. Chances are you blessed yourself with holy water. That gesture serves to remind us of our baptismal promises to love God and our neighbor with everything we have and everything we are. It’s easy to see the goodness in that.

You also made the sign of the cross on yourselves, which signifies that what you’re doing here has to do with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now, when you do anything in another person’s name, you’re doing what they’ve asked you to do. More deeply, in some sense, it’s as if the other person is acting through you. That tips us off to the inner meaning of blessings. When you blessed yourself, you expressed to yourself, to God and to those around you that what God’s about, you’re about, Jesus’ mission is your mission. Your participation in the Eucharist a few minutes from now will publicly ratify that decision. Maybe you didn’t think you were doing all that when you blessed yourself, but you were.

So it is that a blessing is lots more serious than just a greeting card sentiment. How much more serious? Matthew tells us: “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 5) Acting in God’s name, you and I are meant not just to recite blessings, but to ***be*** blessings, such that when people see us, they really see God; when they hear us, they really hear God; when they’re touched by us, that they’re really touched by the love of God.

Let me tell you a story about how that works. I used to volunteer at Hartford Hospital as a friendly visitor. I’d get a list of folks and I would stop in and see if they were up for a visit. One day, I went into a room where a young man was lying in a bed with a colostomy bag hanging by his side. His parents were there too. He was in pretty good spirits, but his parents weren’t. I knew from my list they were Catholic, so I introduced myself as a Catholic deacon.

As the visit unfolded, we prayed a bit and I asked if they would like a blessing. That sent the parents over the top. They told me they were pretty steamed that God would allow their son to suffer the way he was. Pointing to the colostomy bag, the young man’s dad growled at me: “I suppose to you this is some kind of blessing.”

I recalled in the moment something I’d read in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical about suffering¹ and said “I don’t think I’d put it that way. But sooner or later,” I continued, “after your son recovers, he’ll meet someone going through pretty much the same thing he’s suffering right now. He’ll be able empathize with this person’s suffering in ways you or I couldn’t and give that person more credible hope than you or I ever could, simply because he’ll have been through all this. In a word, he’ll be a blessing to someone. And in being a blessing, he’ll receive his blessing in return. Being a blessing out of the experience of our

¹ https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html, December 30, 2016

own suffering is what gives meaning to that suffering. Take a look at a crucifix some time and ask God to show you how that's true."

"Oh," his dad said thoughtfully, "no one ever explained it to me that way. I thought all these prayers and blessings you guys say were just so many fancy words that didn't really do anything."

"They may sound that way from time to time," I admitted, "but the words tell us of God's loving care for us and they're meant to be taken to heart. When they're prayed with fervor and really sink in, the words of God's blessing fuse with the experience of your own suffering in the crucible of your heart. The words and gestures of the unique blessing that only you can give is created in that moment. When you share it with someone, God's love is expressed and suffering is confronted by compassion. That's what blessings do.

"Blessings are how God and humans work together in the give and take of Creation. I'll bet you can even find some words of blessing in your own heart right now to share with your wife and your son. You might not even need words; your presence could be enough to get the blessing across. You may even find that the suffering that's relieved by your blessing is not only his, but your own."

They looked at me and nodded. I blessed them and turned to leave. Looking back one last time as I got to the door, I saw that Mom and dad had moved to their son's bedside, and were holding each other's hands, speaking together softly. They all looked up at me and smiled. It was pure goodness. The sense of God's presence was so thick you could reach out and touch it. If I'd taken a picture of the three of them just then, I'd be able to show you exactly what blessings look like in the flesh.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, and give us all the grace to **be**, like Mary, the blessings to each other God created us to be. Amen.