

BLESSED AND A BLESSING

Ephesians 1:3-14

Author Mary Ann Birth shares her story, I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started to go to school, my classmates—who were constantly teasing—made it clear to me how I must look to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and hollow and somewhat garbled speech. I couldn't even blow up a balloon without holding my nose, and when I bent to drink from a fountain, the water spilled out of my nose.

When my schoolmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I'd tell them that I'd fallen as a baby and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. By the age of seven I was convinced that no one outside my own family could ever love me. Or even like me.

And then I entered the second grade, and Mrs. Leonard's class. I never knew what her first name was — just Mrs. Leonard. She was round and pretty and fragrant, with chubby arms and shining brown hair and warm dark eyes that smiled even on the rare occasions when her mouth didn't. Everyone adored her. But no one came to love her more than I did. And for a special reason.

The time came for the annual “hearing tests” given at our school. I was barely able to hear anything out of one ear, and was not about to reveal yet another problem that would single me out as different. So I cheated. I had learned to watch other children and raised my hand when they did during group testing.

The “whisper test” however, required a different kind of deception: Each child would go to the door of the classroom, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and the teacher would whisper something from her desk, which the child would repeat. Then the same thing was done for the other ear. I had discovered in kindergarten that nobody checked to see how tightly the untested ear was being covered, so I merely pretended to block mine.

As usual, I was last, but all through the testing I wondered what Mrs. Leonard might say to me. I knew from previous years that she whispered things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?” My turn came up. I turned my bad ear to her plugging up the other solidly with my finger, then gently backed my finger out enough to be able to hear. I waited, and then heard the words that God had surely put into her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever:

Mrs. Leonard, the pretty, fragrant teacher I adored, said softly, “I wish you were my little girl.” I wish you were my little girl.

What a gift, what a blessing for that little girl.

Our text this morning from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is a favorite of Christians who understand the good news of Jesus Christ to be an affirmation of God's prevenient grace. And for churches who might question if their work is in vain, Ephesians is a resounding song of hope. The intent of this letter to the Ephesian Christians is to strengthen the church who is faithful in their service to Christ and to remind us who we are and to whom we belong.

The letter is filled with superlatives; abundant blessings and glorious grace are not just available to us, they are lavished upon us. When I think of something being lavished upon me, I see myself in a four or five star hotel where the towels are plush, the towel bars in the bathroom are heated, and Godiva chocolates are left on my pillow. I think of breakfast with huge muffins, thick creamy grits and soft scrambled eggs. But the best thing about all of this is that God had this planned before the foundation of the world. We have been adopted by God and we have been given an inheritance in Christ. God has chosen us...you and me to be holy and blameless in love, forgiven and redeemed through Christ.

The focus of Paul's words are to make sure the people in Ephesus understood that the focus is on God's actions. This is not our doing, this is not something we have 'earned' it is all a gift. And all you and I have to do is celebrate the joy of living as children of God. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor reminisces about her own childhood that awakens this sense. Her grandmother, a tough, stern woman, was an "awesome presence, especially to a child." She was known most for her shrewd business sense and her bad temper. Even her appearance was intimidating with both legs amputated from untreated diabetes, and with her dark aviator sunglasses to protect her eyes, she looked, Taylor says, "like a handicapped bomber pilot." But, she lavished her love on her grandchildren. When they came to visit, there were special treats, piles of presents, and long lazy afternoons together. Each child received a night of pampering. Taylor remembers:

"When my night came she treated me like long lost royalty, filling the tub with suds and then beckoning me in, where she washed each of my limbs in turn and polished my skin with her great soft sponge. After she had dried me off...she anointed me with Jergen's Lotion...then she reached for her dusting powder – Evening in Paris – and tickled me all over with the pale blue puff. When she had finished, I knew I was precious. I was absolutely convinced I was loved."

Ephesians reminds us of God's love for us and the flowing words of this passage envelop us with that kind of love: excessive, tender, richly abundant. Right about now, I am guessing some of you might be asking, "Gee, this sounds an awful lot like the Prosperity Gospel, Pastor Tizzy warned us against last Sunday!" There is a difference, however, a huge difference. The kind of lavish love Paul is speaking of is never meant to be individualistic. It is never meant to be "all about me and my needs." Rather, this blessing, this lavish love is always meant for the community of Christ. And community does not mean different churches, or even different denominations. This is Community with a big "C," listen to verse 10: *Then when the time is right, God will do all that he has planned, and Christ will bring together everything in heaven and on earth.* Right here in the middle of this passage, Paul moves from the focus being on ourselves to a focus on the world. As hard as it might be for us to believe we are beloved, it is even more difficult for us to trust that "all things will be gathered up in Christ. We are more likely to believe that the earth is "going to hell in a hand basket!"

Okay, we are beloved, God loves us with a lavish love, God wants to redeem the entire world – creation included. So what, Pastor Tizzy? What does this have to do with my life, with my everyday living? You can't really expect me to run out and save the world, now can you? I can't, but God might! Just kidding. What we can and really need to ask ourselves, is how can you

and I make a difference in our corner of the world? You see, God does not and will not ever give up on anyone or any neighborhood, or nation. I would first look at what you are already doing...the food bank meets a tremendous need, and by helping with school supplies you will be giving kids a leg up when the school year begins. By doing this, you are already partnering with God to bring relief to a suffering world. By doing this you really do understand that living out your faith is more than attending church, going to Sunday school, singing in the choir, or taking a Bible Study. Faith is not something we put on every morning when we get up...Faith is who we are. And I believe part of our faith journey as the community of Christ is to keep asking God, "What's next?" By doing this we shift from receiving a blessing to being a blessing.

In closing I have a favorite story. Pastor Janet Wolf tells this story about her wildly diverse congregation: "The church had people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets, and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, "those of us who are crazy and those who think they're not."

Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to the church. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism, "this holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power it won't come undone", as the pastor put it – especially grabbed Fayette's imagination. Pastor Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again, "And when I'm baptized, I am...what?"...and the class learned to respond to Fayette each time she asked: "Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold." "O yes!" she'd say, and then we could go back to our discussion. The day of Fayette's baptism came. Pastor Janet described it: "Fayette went under, came up sputtering, and cried, 'And now I am...?' And we ALL sang, 'Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.' 'O Yes!' Fayette shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later Pastor Janet received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So the pastor went in to see her, from a distance she saw her pacing back and forth. When the pastor got to the door, Fayette turned and saw her and said, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and...' She caught sight of herself in the mirror – hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned cock-eyed, she started again, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and...' she looked in the mirror again and declared...'and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!'

We are blessed and we are to be a blessing! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.