

4th Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – Matthew 5:1-12
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Mutual Blessings

At my previous parish, I worked a lot with families with young children. One of the resources that we used was the Montessori-based storytelling curriculum called *Godly Play*. Jerome and Thea Berryman developed this approach to faith formation by supporting children in wondering how their lives fit into the larger narrative of salvation history. Through storytelling, group reflection and play, children are encouraged to develop ways to speak about God and God's activity in their lives. Children are encouraged to use their imagination and creativity to connect their work with God's work while becoming familiar with sacred stories, our holy ancestors, and liturgical practices.

One of the children's favorite story resources is the desert box. The desert box looks like a sand box, but it is a place to imagine how God related to our sacred ancestors in the wilderness, especially as we share stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of the stories tell us how we have been called into covenant with God through our holy ancestors. In imagining how Abraham and Sarah and other prophets honored their relationship with God, we use these words and actions:

“When Abraham prayed, he came so close to God, and God came so close to him, that Abraham came to know what God wanted him to do.”

In one of our first sacred stories, we hear how God makes a covenant with Abraham: “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2b, 3b). God’s promise to Abraham sets the tone for a missional understanding of blessing that extends through our holy ancestors; through Moses and Miriam; Jacob, Leah and Rachel; and Isaac and Rebekah. By “missional” I mean holy people dedicated to God’s holy mission. The earliest followers of Jesus adopted this missional understanding of covenantal blessing in recognizing that they were called to bear witness to Christ’s grace first as disciples and then as apostles to all people and to the ends of the earth. This missional understanding acknowledges that we are blessed, and through our blessedness God invites us to be blessings for one another, from generation to generation.

One of the most recent liturgical resources approved for use in The Episcopal Church is entitled: “I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing.” This resource is the result of holy work that many liturgical leaders and theologians brought forward to honor people and relationships that had previously been marginalized by our faith tradition.

Within the past few years, The Episcopal Church has made these liturgical resources available for use in the celebration and blessing of a marriage for any couple, especially those in same-sex relationships. The language of the liturgies is newly composed, but their theological character acknowledges what is already and always present – God’s eternal goodness and God’s desire to share that goodness with all of God’s creation. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, God saw that it was very good. Contemporary theologian Matthew Fox refers to our initial and ultimate relationship with God as “Original Blessing.”

Fox’s perspective on Original Blessing was intended to awaken our hearts to the divine goodness within us, rather than dwell on the church’s doctrine of Original Sin. Certainly all of us have the capacity to stray from God and God’s ways. But our goodness and blessedness call us back into relationship with God and all creation when we remember God’s covenant to always be with us and always be for us.

God’s covenant with us comes with a sacred invitation to serve alongside Christ and one another in manifesting God’s realm in our midst. As followers of Jesus, God’s mission is our mission. When God blessed humankind and said be fruitful and multiply, that directive was not limited to procreation. To be fruitful and multiply in the context of God’s ongoing creation invites us to use our imagination and creativity in sharing God’s

eternal goodness and our Original Blessedness in our homes, churches, our schools, our workplaces, and communities. Being a blessing to others is integral to our shared call to participate in God's mission of reconciling love in the world, by doing justice, being merciful, and intentionally walking alongside God.

Each of us at some point in our lives has experienced many if not all of the circumstances that Jesus sheds light on in the Beatitudes. We know what it is like to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers,

and to be persecuted for righteousness' sake - for we are blessed in our Original Blessing and in our Baptismal Blessing and in our daily blessings that we may be a blessing to others - those we know by name, those we know by affiliation, and those whose concerns we come to know through faith in action.

When we come so close to God and God comes so close to us, we come to know that God desires for us to live in the service of God's mission. May we honor God's covenant with us by graciously offering and thankfully receiving blessings alongside our neighbors as together we manifest God's Realm for all, from generation to generation, and for all eternity.

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