

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“People of God: Embracing the Blessing”

Rev. Dr. John Judson

September 28, 2014

Genesis 27:41-28:5, Matthew 21:23-32

The little girl is standing in a field of daisies. Slowly she begins plucking off the petals of a picked flower one by one as she counts them. She does really well until she gets to six, which she misses and then goes back and picks it up. Finally when she reaches one, suddenly a voice begins a countdown and the little girl looks up as if to find the voice. The camera moves in toward one of her eyes. As soon as all that you can see on the screen is the black of her eye, and the countdown reaches zero a nuclear explosion erupts and fills the screen. The voice that then comes is that of President Johnson who says, “These are the stakes, to make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the darkness. We must either love each other or we must die.” It was only shown one time...that’s right, a single time...yet it is credited with turning the 1964 race for president from a close contest into a runaway for Johnson. It proved again that attack ads work and work well. Little wonder then that that’s all we see on our television screens during this season when politicians go out to do battle.

Lest you think that this is something new, don’t. I say that not only because they have been part of presidential politics from George Washington on, but because it is the tactic employed by those who opposed Jesus. His opponents tried debating him and they lost. They tried to discredit his theology and he prevailed. So they turned to negative ads. They called him a drunkard. They said that he was filled with demons. And here in our morning’s story they challenge his authority. Within Judaism those who were teachers were highly trained. They could list the rabbis under whom they had studied. Or those in the Temple could speak of their authority coming from the high priest or other Temple officials. The chief priests and elders then decided that they best way to deal with Jesus was to question his authority and thus cause his followers to abandon him.

Jesus, however, was ready as always. Rather than attack back he plays “Let’s Make a Deal” and then tells a story with a pop quiz at the end. The Let’s Make a Deal portion of his response was to tell the religious leaders that if they could answer his question he would answer theirs. Fair enough, they must have thought for they agreed. Jesus however poses a question about who authorized John the Baptist to baptize, God or man. They are unwilling to answer because either answer will get them in trouble. The story Jesus offers again points to John, even if indirectly. The story is about two sons who are supposed to do a task. One agrees and doesn’t do it. The other refuses at first but then changes their mind and completes the task. When asked which does the will of the father, the leaders choose the latter, as they should have. This then opens the door for Jesus to unleash his own attack on the leaders...but there is a difference between the leaders’ attack on him and his on them. Jesus does so not to destroy them but to save them. He does so not to gain political advantage but to unleash the blessing of God upon them.

Over the past month or so we have been reading the story of Jacob and Esau. At the heart of that story is the idea that there is something called the blessing; the blessing which God had given to Abraham, which he gave to Isaac and then Isaac was to give to his eldest son Esau. For those of you who have not seen all of the episodes of this story, you missed the younger son Jacob conspiring with his mother to steal the blessing, Esau selling his birthright and thus his blessing to Jacob for some food and Jacob lying to his father and receiving the blessing. Our morning’s story is about the outcome of these actions...Jacob’s life in danger. But this raises the question of why the blessing matters so much. It matters because the blessing is no more and no less than the fullness of life which only God can give. It is a life enhancing and life transforming gift. It offers the possibility of physical, emotional and

spiritual well-being. It means security, being cared for and watched over by God. It means that one's life was not lived at the hands of fate, or lesser gods, but in the hands of the God of creation. Little wonder why both brothers wanted it so desperately.

All of that brings us back to John the Baptist. What John believed and what he proclaimed was that God was sending into the world a messiah who would unleash this blessing on all of the people of God. But in order to receive this blessing one had to repent, meaning turn away from a belief that the blessing was a possession which one gained at birth. One had to admit that the blessing was a gift of God that one had to continually embrace. For many people this was what they had been waiting for. Those who lived on the margins of society; tax collectors and prostitutes among them, who had been told that the blessing could never be theirs, flocked to John. They opened their lives to the possibility that this messiah could bless them and change their lives. For others however this was a difficult thing to hear. The religious leaders with whom Jesus is engaged in debate refused to go. They did not need a messiah to unleash the blessing of God. They controlled it. They were the ones who could give it away or keep it to themselves. They were the blessing gatekeepers. So when John asked them to repent and be open to this new thing that God was doing, they refused. Jesus wanted them to reconsider their choice.

My guess is that for some of us we might have a difficult time with going out to John as well. I say this not intending to be critical, but because we are part of a culture which believes that in some ways we already possess the blessing. After all we are Christians. We have been baptized. We have been confirmed. We have made a profession of faith. We are here in church. We know, at least to some degree the doctrines and beliefs of the church. And to use an oft used term...we are saved. All of this is wonderful, but the blessing, the full life which God wants to give us is not something that we can ever hang on to. It is like an embrace. The gift of an embrace, a hug, is that it changes us. In the moment in which we are taken up in the arms of another, whether it is the hug of a child, a friend or the one we love, we know that we are loved. We know that another cares about us and believes that we are worthy of this attention. We know that we are not alone in the world. It changes us. It adds to our humanity. But, it cannot be stored away for later use. It cannot be saved. It is something that must be repeated over and over again as it alters our perspective on who we are and how the world looks.

The blessing can only be embraced. And we embrace it when we move toward God in Jesus Christ. For you see, the love of Christ, the blessing of God is always moving toward us. Through our faith we move toward God. In worship we move toward God. In prayer we move toward God. In meditation and in service and perhaps even in viewing the beauty of nature we move toward God. We move toward embracing the blessing and being embraced by it. This is why exercising all of the spiritual disciplines matter because they are where the Spirit meets us with the fullness of the blessing that Jesus Christ unleashed in the world.

You and I live in a world that tries to convince us that the fullness of life can only be reached if we buy their product, reach a certain level of success or attend the right college...you choose which one. But the reality of the blessing of God is that only there is full life found...a life which will see us through the hard times and enrich the good times, assuring us that we are indeed the unique and beloved children of God.

My challenge to you this week then is to ask yourselves, "How am I embracing the blessing that God has given to me?"