

**Bless to Me, Part 1: Holy Days**  
**by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.**  
Countryside Community Church  
July 30, 2017

Scripture: Psalm 113:1-4; Matthew 6:11

## **I. What is Blessing?**

It's hard for me to believe that, two Sundays from now, I'll board a plane in Omaha around dinner time and wake up in an entirely different country – Northern Ireland. Can you imagine how long this journey would have taken before planes, trains, and automobiles? Twelve months of travel compressed into twelve hours – with cocktails, hot meals, climate control, and in-flight movies thrown in.

The ancients would have considered such speedy and comfortable travel downright magical – far preferable even to a genie's flying carpet, or Harry Potter's flying broom. Even Jesus's bodily ascension into heaven would seem a bit "primitive" compared to the style and sophistication with which a long-distance traveler moves through the air these days – even flying economy. It's hard to imagine why any of us find reason to complain about air travel, missed connections and all.

But we do.

Chalk it up to the First World curse of entitlement. Once a new product or technology arises that makes our lives a little easier or more comfortable, it takes us about 30 seconds to feel entitled to have it.

I'm guilty of this attitude myself. When I was looking for a new car, I discovered that some cars nowadays come with radar-controlled cruise control. This means that when you get on the freeway you can set your speed to 65 mph and your car will automatically slow down if the car in front of you is going 61 mph – and speed up again when that car is out of the way. I've been driving in a car with this feature for a little over a week now and already I have moved from awe and wonder over the fact that my car has a freaking radar in it to absolute expectation that every car I will ever own must have this feature. (Of course, all cars will probably be self-driving by the time I'm ready for a new ride ...)

I wonder what would happen if, whenever I got in my car, I would experience all over again the childlike wonder of that radar. Or what if I never lost my sense of gratitude for being able to fly to distant lands in a matter of hours rather than months, and will (likely) never have to travel by horse and buggy followed by a long, rocky ride on a rickety boat. Each day would be "my lucky day". And what if the gratitude I feel for each and every new and wonderful thing in my life never really went away but resided just below the surface of my consciousness? Each day would be fabulous! Each and every day

would be *holy*. For what is a holy day (holiday!), anyway, if not a day that reminds you that every day is a holy day?

In the Christian tradition, no one understood this idea better than the ancient Celtic Christians of Ireland, Scotland, and parts of Great Britain and Wales. The Celts are a segment of Christian faith that took seriously the opening chapter of the Gospel of John where it says that all things are created through God's Word which, in John's Gospel, is synonymous with the Spirit of the Living Christ. This understanding is reflected in a famous, 5<sup>th</sup> Century prayer of St. Patrick – the first missionary to Ireland:

Christ with me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me,  
Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right,  
Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down,  
Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.

This idea that Christ could be in all things may seem strange or foreign to our modern ears. It becomes less strange if we translate the concept into our modern, scientific framework. Modern science, for instance, has proven that everything we perceive as solid around us is not solid at all, at the atomic level. Everything we see and touch is really 99.999999% empty space. It really is! That's because the distance between the nucleus of an atom and its encircling electron cloud is, on a relative scale, as great as the distance between the earth and the sun. What holds all the tiny particles of matter together, despite all the empty space between them, is energy. Different kinds of energy we scarcely understand.

If you want to understand the Celtic perception that Christ is in all things, then one way of approaching their understanding is to think about all that energy swirling and vibrating in every material thing as a form of consciousness – consciousness quite different from our own, to be sure, but consciousness nonetheless. Christ consciousness!

Now, I'm not claiming to know for certain that everything is held together by Christ consciousness, or any form of consciousness at all. Yet I know from personal experience that if you treat matter this way – if you treat all forms of matter as if it is alive and is therefore part of God's awareness of you, your whole day changes. Your

whole experience of the world changes. And you experience each day as being chock full of potential blessings. Blessings that have been waiting for you to recognize them for what they are, and receive them in the only manner in which they can be received – with a sense of *reverence*, not entitlement. In fact, a sense of entitlement seems to kill all chance of receiving blessing, even if what we feel entitled to is quite wonderful in and of itself.

According to the Celts, blessing has more to do with the way in which we receive something rather than the thing itself. Blessing, therefore, has nothing to do with luck or wishful thinking. Nor do blessings have anything to do with God’s desire to give one person a blessing that is withheld from another. Blessing has to do with noticing, awareness, having “eyes to see,” and “ears to hear,” as Jesus said. It’s about having the humility to treat what we receive as the gift of a God who is aware of us, and loves us beyond our comprehension.

In Hebrew, the root word for “blessing” (*barakah*) – means to “bend the knee.” If you “bend the knee” toward God’s Creation – noticing and admiring God’s handiwork, treating Creation as the incarnation of God’s love itself – then you will discover “Christ in all things,” and you will live a blessed life. Every day would truly become for you a holy day. You wouldn’t have to wait for “Christmas in July”!

## **II. Holy-Days**

Many of the world’s great religious traditions advocate that their followers not only mark the beginning and ending of every day in ways that orient us toward God’s blessings, but that we maintain routines throughout the day to keep us continually aware of God’s presence and thereby open to giving and receiving blessing.

The Muslim practice of Salat, for instance, is an obligatory prayer practice for every physically and mentally able Muslim who has reached the age of puberty. To practice Salat, a person “bends the knee” – figuratively and literally – five times a day in prayer and supplication. The times are dictated by the position of the sun in the sky, which causes the one praying to be more aware of the movement of God’s Creation throughout the day.

To perform Salat, the practitioner finds a ritually clean environment – which can be as simple as a closet at work. Before praying, one performs a ritual ablution consisting of washing hands, mouth, nose, arms, face, the fringe of the hair, the ears, and the feet three times each in that order (except for the hair which is only cleansed once).

After this ritual cleansing, a person offers a prescribed prayer while standing, followed by bowing with palms placed on the knees, followed by another standing prayer. Each cycle of prayer also includes two prostrations in which a person gets down on their knees, touching their nose and forehead to the ground as an act of total submission to God. These prostrations are followed by a period of sitting to quietly acknowledge God’s presence and authority.

Can you imagine interrupting each and every day five times to perform the Salat prayer ritual? While we can certainly find examples of those who faithfully perform Salat yet whose lives appear to be anything but holy and God-serving, I have the feeling that the Salat prayer is part of the reason why, when you and I encounter Muslims, they are some of the kindest, most gentle, and gracious people we know. For an authentic Muslim, who is reminded of God's presence, power, and compassion continually from dawn until dusk, how could any day not become a holy-day?

### **III. Feasting On the Holy**

Of course, praying multiple times a day is not exclusive to Muslim faith and practice. Orthodox Jews pray three times daily and four times on the Sabbath and most Jewish holidays.

While Christians don't commonly have a set number of prayers they make each day, it is common in various Christian monastic traditions to follow a "Liturgy of the Hours," or "Divine Office". Those who follow it pray seven times, starting with the prayer of Matins before sunrise and ending with Compline, or Night Prayer, around 9 p.m.

While I am a big fan of prayer and meditation, I must admit that throughout most of my life I have not prayed seven times a day, or even four or five – unless you count those "please get me to work on time" kind of prayers. Yet I don't simply pray willy-nilly, either. For most of the 35 or so years I have been practicing daily prayer and meditation, I have generally made room for it just once in a day, for thirty minutes or more, and offered occasional prayers "as the Spirit moves me" throughout the day. I have tried praying at prescribed times, to increase my mindfulness of God's presence throughout the day, but after the initial excitement wears off – in about three days – I normally find myself forgetting to do it, or failing to schedule my time properly.

In the last year, however, I have been experimenting with my prayer routine. In the course of my experiments, I stumbled upon a way to consistently pray multiple times per day that I have no trouble forgetting.

Those of you who know me know that I have absolutely no trouble at all remembering a meal. Nor do I seem to leave out snacks once or twice a day. I finally realized that if I would keep my morning prayer ritual but simply develop a prayer ritual that is centered around my eating patterns, I could maintain a routine where I pray at least four times a day, and usually five or more times. The reason I bother mentioning it is because this practice has done far more than I ever would have imagined to heighten my daily awareness of God's surrounding presence, and of the holiness of each moment of each day. In other words, the practice has increased the number of blessings I experience in life simply by raising my awareness of the many ways life wants to bless me, as well as my intention to actively receive and respond to these blessings.

I'm not advocating that you do what I do. But for those who are curious, here's what I do: It's quite simple. Before any food enters my mouth – whether it be part of a meal or a snack – I intentionally recall Jesus's words, "This is my body, broken for you ... This is my blood, shed for you." (He did say "do this as often as you eat/drink of this in remembrance of me," didn't he?) Then I call to mind all the different ways in which a "body" was broken and "blood" was shed in order that I might partake of food before me – even if the "body" is simply a plant's "body" and the "blood" is simply the lifeblood of a person who gave a portion of their time and talent to harvest, transport, sell, prepare, and serve the food. As I do so, I pay careful attention to every flavor, texture, sight, smell, and even sound I can distinguish, remembering what the Celtic Christians say about Christ being "in all things". Foodie that I am, it's amazing to me how much more vibrant each bite of food tastes when I do this, and coincidentally how much more satiated I feel with less food. More significantly, I feel more aware of the fact that the world actively wants to bless me, which heightens my experience not only of food but many other areas of life. I look at trees with greater appreciation and awareness, and hear birdsong differently. I dare say that I even see people a little differently, realizing that if Christ is in all things, Christ may certainly be found in fellow human beings, whether or not they intend to bless me.

Again, I mention what I've been doing lately not necessarily to suggest you "go and do likewise," but to get you thinking about the ways you stay connected to God, and God's blessings, throughout the day.

How will you make each day a holy-day?