

Bless To Me
Part 4- Special Moments
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I. Rites of Passage Scripture: Luke 1:57-80

For the past several weeks we have been discussing the idea of “blessing” and how it is interpreted and revealed within the Celtic Christian tradition. The central idea is that blessing is not viewed as a reward for good behavior or a sign of chosen-ness of God on one set of people over another, but rather, “blessing” is the understanding that God is present in absolutely everything, all the time, and is constantly participating with us in what we call life. If we are to experience such a participatory God and seek to be open to God’s presence with us we must seek eyes that see, ears that hear, and hearts that yearn for this experience of God’s presence.

This week we are speaking to those special moments in our lives that we choose to mark as important or holy, so to speak. Often we call these moments “Rites of Passage” in our lives. Most of us have been through several of these rites of passages already in our living. They include things like baby showers; baptisms; first days of school; first communion; confirmation; sweet 16; graduation; coming of Age at 18 when we can finally vote and even are eligible to fight in a war; reaching the drinking age 21; and our wedding days. For some of us we have had extra experiences such as Ordinations or being sworn into office, or receiving special occupational licenses. For some of us we have been present when others who are close to us receiving their final prayers before they die. In the Catholic tradition, many of these types of rites of passages are considered sacraments: Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Confession, Wedding, Ordination, and Last Rites. In our Protestant church we celebrate only 2 sacraments: Baptism and Communion.

Macia McFee, a worship consultant and author of this series suggests that *Rites of Passages come in many forms and are sacred thresholds into new and uncharted territory. These special, once in a lifetime moments, when surrounded in words and acts of blessing, provide us with courage and assurance that we are not alone and that our next steps are anointed and held by God.* These special moments in our lives are times that we set apart in a special way to acknowledge our connection with God in our lives. They are our way of opening up to seek meaning in our living while yearning for God’s presence in all of our steps.

Many traditions outside of Christianity also form rites of passage that are celebrated to connect people to the creation that surrounds them. Native Americans are known for their Spirit quests, where boys and girls who come of age are sent out into the wilderness for several days to seek their spiritual animal and their connectedness to the sacred life all around them. And in the Amish tradition, teenagers between the ages of 14-16 are sent away from home in a rite called *Rumspringa*, which literally translated means “jumping or hopping around.” The idea is that their children are sent out into the world to be a full part of what is available to them there, and then they are able to make an informed choice to either continue in the Amish tradition or to leave the community.

Often, these rites of passages are celebrations and times of joy in our lives. But there are several rites of passages or moments in our lives that we set aside as special that are times of grief or continued struggle. Like marking the days of sobriety, or days of being cancer-free. For many, anniversaries of a death of a one they have loved are always on their mind. Another ceremony or rite that is celebrated often is what’s known as the Divorce Ceremony. The rituals in these ceremonies are done for healing and acknowledging the closing of one part of your life in order to open up for a new way of being in the world. These rites are

performed to help re-build self-esteem and confidence in the individual and to re-connect them with the community that is still there to support them and encourage them in living life most fully.

So whether these life events are celebrating joyous occasions, reflective moments, or sad times for us, they all include acknowledgement that God is in this life with us, throughout the good and the bad.

Music Offering

II. Remembering Scripture: Psalm 42:1-8

When we consider special moments in our lives as a community, we often think of commemorations. These types of rituals happen repeatedly, like celebrating an annual holiday, or remembering a certain event every now and then. These commemorations can happen as daily reminders, monthly rituals, weekly conversations, or over longer periods of time like every five or ten years. Often times, commemorations are an intentional remembering of those times we have faced specific struggles and/or triumphs as a people: whether it be our city, our nation, our faith tradition, even global commemorations. Remembering the World Wars that we have experienced as a people. Celebrating the Olympics or the World Cup as a global community. Remembering times in history when faith traditions clashed with one another: during the Crusades for instance, where the Christians initiated several attempts throughout a four century period between 1095 and 1492 to reclaim the Holy Lands from the Muslims; or during the Reformation of the 16th century, when many dared to question the sacred rule of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. This year is the 500th year of the Reformation and will be celebrated and commemorated widely through ecumenical events between the Protestant churches and the Catholic church. Our own Center For Faith Studies is Bringing Rev Mark Hanson on October 5th this year to help us mark the occasion and speak to us about reforming faith traditions that continue today through our interfaith dialogues.

Every year on 9-11 we commemorate the terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC, and the nearly 3000 people who lost their lives that day. Last year we gathered together with our Tri-Faith Partners at Temple Israel to create a *Circle of Peace* and speak some words of reconciliation and love in a world of violence and hate. We hope to re-create this circle again this year as a response to the many acts of hate and violence that continue in our world.

Last weekend we saw hate with it's hood removed in Charlottesville where three people were killed and people of faith were barricaded in a church worshipping and praying for peace while angry White Supremacists surrounded the church, carrying baseball bats and torches, chanting "Blood and Soil." Rev. Traci Blackmon from our own United Church of Christ was present in that church and described the event in a MSNBC interview. The faith group consisting of multi-faith clergy and leaders had to be ushered out through the back alleys after having been held captive in the church for over 30 minutes. And lest we think things like this can only happen somewhere else, look at a photo taken here in Nebraska at the highway 80 Exit at Ashland. And, there are political rallies planned by similar supremacist groups on September 9 in several places throughout Omaha, Millard and Lincoln. How will we commemorate these types of terrorist acts? As a faith community, how will we respond to the sin of racial injustice in our country? And it is a sin: anything that separates us from our brothers and sisters separates us from God as well, and this separation is the very meaning of sin. So these political stances aren't just political, they stand against the very gospel that we profess as a community. As a church, how will we speak the gospel in such a time as this? As a nation how are we responding to overwhelming polarization and oppression in a country that was build on justice for all?

Last Thursday, as reported by the New York Times, "Spain was hit by its worst terrorist attack in more than a decade, when a van driver plowed into dozens of people enjoying a sunny afternoon on one of Barcelona's most famous thoroughfares, killing at least 13 people and leaving 80 bloodied on the

pavement. Hours later, the Catalan police said they foiled a second van attack, in the seaside town of Cambrils 70 miles to the south, fatally shooting at least four people who appeared to be wearing explosive belts, according to Spanish news reports. The Barcelona attack was at least the sixth time in the past few years that assailants using vehicles as deadly weapons have struck a European city.” How will we commemorate or remember these brutal acts in our world? As a faith community, how will we respond to the intolerance of people who view God differently than us? How might we provide an alternative witness to how God is working in the world? What will be our story to tell?

Commemorations, are intentional remembering. We set these times apart as special moments not only so we do not repeat our mistakes, but also because they help us remember who we are and what we are called to be. Remembering gives us intentional opportunities to seek God in our lives, and help us to live most fully into who God created us to be. David Whyte, a poet living in the Pacific Northwest, shares with us the benefits of remembering who we are: “Remembering what we have forgotten is the first practical step home; the opening of a tidal gate that brings us into contact with the larger, stronger currents of existence. Exile and forgetting are natural states for most human beings, but so are remembering and recalling.” Remembering re-opens doors to new possibilities, so we can always chose a different path. Commemorating events helps us to choose the better path this time around.

Musical Meditation

As we listen to music, please be in intentional meditation about a new ways of responding to hate in the world. What is our role, both individually, and as a faith community to speaking truth to hate and injustice?

III. Sacred Thresholds Scripture: I Corinthians 5:16-19

Rites of Passages help us to mark the end of one part of life, and open us “to enter uncharted territory,” knowing that God is with us and guiding our steps. Commemorations and remembering give us opportunities to acknowledge the good in our lives, as well as the possibility to change our thinking and turn away from the sin of injustice and oppression in our living. We are in the midst of a major paradigm shift in our world today. This is our threshold moment. How will we begin again? How will we frame our stories for the future of our world?

Tri-Faith is part of our story. Today we celebrate the possibility of diverse religions coming together in the love of God to do a new thing. We are taking the opportunity at our Tri-Faith picnic to share with one another: our rituals; our prayers; our traditions surrounding food; and our stories. We are taking the time to get to know one another better, not in order to judge which tradition is right and which is wrong, but we come together in curiosity and openness to hearing what brings us joy in each of our traditions. What can we learn from one another? What might inspire us from the traditions of the other partners?

From this learning and sharing we can begin to frame new stories of our experiences that will lead us into a whole new future. These new stories will be the truth we speak to hate in the world. They will be the witness we speak to the millennial generation who are watching us and wondering if faith communities can ever be more than gatherings for bigotry, exclusion, hatred, and violence.

We hear from our gospel that in Christ all things are made new. ¹⁷*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* ¹⁸*All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;* This is our calling. This is our story. Let us walk boldly and bravely into our new futures, speaking truth and love in the face of hate and violence, participating with God and moving all things to good. Amen.