

First Presbyterian Church
Jude 24-25, “Prepared in Worship: Blessing and Dismissal”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/3/2017

Are you ready for a blessing today?

Perhaps more specifically, if you were told that God
was ready to bless you with supernatural goodness
that would move your life into deeper alignment
with the Kingdom of God,
would you be open to receiving that blessing?

How would your life be different if that happened?

We’ve come through all the major elements of Christian worship this summer,
considering how these things prepare us for life
on the streets where we live, work, play, and serve.

We began with Gathering and Peace – it’s really something that we are
here together in the same place
and that we’re reconciled by the peace of Jesus Christ.

We then went on to Praise and Thanks – a central element of worship
is cultivating gratitude for who God is and what God has done.

We followed that with Repentance and Confession – in light of who God is
we must also be honest about who we are and our areas of need.

Then came Creed – not only do we confess our sin in worship,
but we confess our faith, and the faith of those who came before us.
We considered how we are shaped for facing present day challenges
by saying again the confessions of faith handed down to us
from generation to generation.

Of course you can’t go far in worship without Prayer and Intercession –
in worship we are fundamentally coming before God to communicate
and to ask for things to be made right in our world.

In Offering we both give sacrificially (as the widow noticed by Jesus)
and we pursue the use of gifts to benefit those in need,
not just pastors or religious elites.

And in Word and Sacrament we enter into a new space generated
by the Holy Spirit and Christ the Word made flesh.

In this new space we are enabled
to see the world around us in fresh ways.

Having come all this way, we finish with Blessing and Dismissal,
and the element of our worship service known as the “benediction.”

Considering how the word “blessing” is used in our world today,
one cultural commentator collected

“a few of the ways that God has touched [her] social network
over the past few months:

- helped a friend get accepted into graduate school. (She was “blessed” to be there.)
- made it possible for a yoga instructor’s Caribbean spa retreat. (“Blessed to be teaching in paradise,” she wrote.)
- helped a new mom outfit her infant in a tiny designer frock. (“A year of patiently waiting and it finally fits! Feeling blessed.”)
- graced a colleague with at least 57 Facebook wall postings about her birthday. (“So blessed for all the love,” she wrote, to approximately 900 of her closest friends.)

The commentator continues:

“God has, in fact, recently blessed my network with dazzling job promotions, coveted speaking gigs, the most wonderful fiancés ever, front row seats at Fashion Week, and nominations for many a “30 under 30” list. And, blessings aren’t limited to the little people, either. [God]’s been known to bless Kanye West and Kim Kardashian with exotic getaways and expensive bottles of Champagne, overlooking sunsets of biblical proportion (naturally).

Erin Jackson, a stand-up comedian in Virginia, said, “There’s literally a chick in my Facebook feed right now who just posted a booty shot of herself — and all it says is ‘blessed.’ Now wait. Is that really a blessing?”

There’s nothing quite like invoking holiness as a way to brag about your life.

Apparently #blessed has been used more than 52 million times on the photo-sharing website, Instagram.

On the one hand, who are we to say someone else isn't blessed
by whatever has given them pleasure that day?

On the other hand, when being "blessed" is code language for a humble-brag
that says, "I got something nice and you didn't,"
does that impact our understanding of God's blessing
as we find it in scripture,
or in the benediction of a worship service?

Undeniably, every good and perfect gift comes from God.

But how do these superficial blessings mesh with Jesus' words,
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"?

A biblical understanding of blessings goes beyond just nice sounding words
and seemingly positive things happening to us.
A blessing is a word or action that God honors and works through
to bring about Christ-likeness in people and places. REPEAT

JUDE 24-25

One of my favorite such blessings comes at the end of a brief letter
known as "Jude" that they stuck in the Bible
right before the book of Revelation.

I thought this letter was great as a kid, because it has no chapters, only verses,
and so you can say, "I read Jude 1-25"
and it sounds like an impressive amount of Bible reading
(if you're into impressing people with Bible reading).

It was written by a man who identifies himself as Jude, the brother of James.
James was an authority in the early Jerusalem church,
and the brother of Jesus, so it would seem that Jude
was also Jesus brother, except ... why didn't he just say so?

It may have been too close a connection to name out loud,

and so he opts instead to call himself, “a servant of Jesus Christ.”

At any rate, Jude is writing this letter because of some false teachings that have made their way into the church.

He’s worried that the church will stumble on account of being led astray, and he wants to counter these teachings that are leading to immorality and greed.

His call to these people is instead to stay away from division.

Instead they should build each other up through praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping themselves in God’s love, and waiting for the mercy of Jesus Christ.

The exclamation point on this message comes in the form of a doxology, or a blessing.

It begins with the phrase, “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling.”

As I just mentioned, Jude wants the church to walk the path of Christ without distractions interference of the false teachings.

But he’s not merely laying this load of perfection on them as though they could do it on their own.

Instead he blesses them with the reminder that there is someone who is able to keep them from stumbling in their present circumstances here on earth.

Not only that, but this person is also able

“to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”

This blessing extends all the way out until these people come face to face with this “One who is able.” And somehow in this Being’s glorious presence these believers will be presented without fault and with great joy.

Why? Because they worked so hard on being good Christians?

Because they lived perfectly?

No – the letter is being written to them precisely because they *weren’t* living perfectly.

It’s possible because they prayed in the Holy Spirit, kept themselves in God’s love, and waited for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ

to bring them to eternal life.

Those things represent sharing in the life of the Trinity,
not personal accomplishments.

As Jeffrey Greenman writes in *Pedagogy of Praise*,

“The value of a blessing is that it reminds us that we do not live our lives
out of our own puny, frail human resources.

We cannot live lives that are pleasing to God
by human willpower and sheer determination
to be good people.”

You may have noticed that the person who is able to do all of this
hasn't yet been named directly, and so there is a clarifying line
to conclude the blessing:

“to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!”

Who is able? It is the only God our Savior who is able.

And in naming that God, Jude turns blessing into praise.

To this God be glory –

that everyone will know exactly who God is and what God has done.

To this God be majesty –

that the true king of the earth will be understood
as the one who is truly sovereign over all things.

To this God be power –

that all the things God wants to do will in fact be accomplished
through his power.

To this God be authority –

that no one should claim a rival status to our allegiance.

And all of this, Jude says, comes *through* Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus is the one who mediates God's glory, majesty, power, and authority
to the church.

Jesus is the channel through which we have access to these things.

In other words, none of these attributes of God exist apart from Jesus Christ,
he shares in them fully, and they come to the church through him.

Finally, the blessing declares, that this has always been true.
Not only that, but it is true right now.
Not only that, but it will continue be true for all time.
It's an unshakable blessing for all times and places.

Finally, the blessing ends with "Amen."

Amen – it is true, believe it, bank on it, yes!

When we close our service with a benediction,
the purpose is for you to know that God's blessing, love, grace,
and empowerment are really and truly for you.
And so I always ask you to let me know that you understand that
by giving you a chance to respond.

"And all God's people said ... 'AMEN!'"

Once again, here's Jeffrey Greenman:

"Knowing that we are blessed by God makes it possible to take up the challenge of being Christ's people in the world. We gather Sunday by Sunday to praise God, hear his word, be fed at his table, and be equipped for his service. Then what? Where do we go? Not simply into the foyer to drink coffee. We are headed back into the world."

How different is this sense of "being blessed" from the humble-brag blessing culture we find around us? Being blessed means we've been moved into alignment with the life of the Triune God.

That may or may not be perceived as a positive thing from the perspective of the world around us.

Each week I close the service with a biblical benediction –
sometimes the blessing of Aaron from Numbers 6,
sometimes Paul's blessing at the end of Ephesians 3,
sometimes the great conclusion of Hebrews 13,
sometimes this blessing from Jude or some other.

That's not going to change anytime soon,
but I want to close this sermon with a blessing that isn't from the Bible.

It was written by an Irish poet, philosopher,
and Catholic Priest named John O'Donohue.

I share it today because, like the first part of Jude's blessing,
it doesn't mention God outright. God's presence and activity are implied.
That's very often how we encounter God's blessing in daily life.

Also like the blessing at the end of Jude,
it speaks directly to those challenges we face in life:
when the weight deadens on our shoulders,
when we are confronted by loss,
when the ocean goes black beneath us.

But in these times, the blessing calls forth something to come our way
that is beyond us, and beyond our world,
yet which comes to us through the world.

Beannacht, by John O'Donohue

On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,
May the clay dance
To balance you.

And when your eyes
Freeze behind
The grey window
And the ghost of loss
Gets into you,
May a flock of colours,
Indigo, red, green
And azure blue,
Come to awaken in you
A meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
In the currach of thought
And a stain of ocean
Blackens beneath you,
May there come across the waters
A path of yellow moonlight
To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
May the clarity of light be yours,
May the fluency of the ocean be yours,
May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
Wind work these words
Of love around you,
An invisible cloak
To mind your life.

As I see it, this beautifully evokes the way that we typically experience
the glory, majesty, power, and authority of God through Jesus Christ,
who is with us by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comforting us
like a slow wind with words of God's love;
an invisible cloak to mind our life.