

Bless Their Hearts
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(Note: These are sermon notes and not a formal manuscript.)

There is a saying in the south. It is a catch-all phrase when one doesn't know what else to say. "Bless Your Heart". Sounds nice right? Really thoughtful and caring...but it's not. It's another way to say "Are you kidding me?" or "You can't possibly be serious?"

When we read the gospel today, I imagine Jesus may have thought for a fleeting moment (in his head, because he was human) "Bless their hearts" when James and John, the sons of Zebedee (sometimes also called the "Sons of Thunder") asked to sit at his right and left hand in heaven. At first, Jesus asks them if they are willing to follow the same path as him but when they said they were, Jesus reminded James and John of a startling reality. You have no idea what is to come. And ultimately that position wasn't Jesus' to give.

What the brothers had forgotten was how Jesus was not acting solo. Jesus was the presence of the God with heart and flesh. The very extension of the divine in the world. It was God's call to make invitations to those places of honor. This was not about status, it was about goodness. How difficult it must have been when they thought toughing it out as members of Jesus' inner circle would entitle them to special privileges. The equivalent of Disney's "Lightening Lane" right into heaven.

And how challenging it is for US when we utter those same desires. "Hey Jesus, can't you make it just a little easier on me or the ones I love? I have been doing your work willingly, serving others, and praising your name. Doesn't that entitle me to a LITTLE break or special status? Then I imagine Jesus whispering a loving version of "Bless Your Heart" into our ears when he reminds us that a life in God looks upside down to popular culture.

Our faithfulness doesn't give us a place to go higher and higher into success and power but to go deeper and deeper into life, connection, and the natural response to serve... to love... and grow into the closest resemblance of a beloved child of God. It is inside each of us. I already see it in each of you.

Then we see how the other disciples responded. They were trying to give them the "cut off" signal or get them back on track. The other disciples may not have had the full picture either

but what they did know was to listen more than to speak... and to serve more than demand. A denial of self.

And maybe we can see ourselves in the Gospel as well. I am sure many of us have asked for things that are not good for us...or not meant for us. Well... I will make an "I" statement. I have asked for things that were likely not God's will because sometimes I just want to be the one who knows best for me. But then we remember that God has counted the hairs on our heads and knows us better than anyone.

The readings also bring us face-to-face with a reality we don't always like to face. The prophet Isaiah, in particular. What does it mean for Jesus to bear our sins and to take on the punishment? To be crushed. To be the lamb brought to the slaughter instead of us. In church language, we call it atonement. At the table, the Holy Spirit, through our prayers, transforms bread and wine into the body and blood. Not because we are carnivores or God needed a gruesome blood sacrifice to make things right. But because I do believe there is no limit to how God loves us.

The root of Atonement is at "at-one-ment." God's intention for us was to be at one with one another and to be at one with our creator. It was and continues to be all about reconciliation. Putting back together the broken pieces of our world. Jesus' presence in our lives is not about exchange or reparation but about liberation.

Where do you feel like you need liberation? Have you offered it up to Jesus? How does the life lived in Jesus have the prospect of setting you free? Speak it into reality with the power of the Holy Spirit who is already blowing in and through your life. Maybe when you become still you can hear it blowing. The dry bones of your life rattling back into place. Because with God's love we all can live.

How can these readings move us from something we READ into something we LIVE? Last week's readings spoke about the liberation from physical possessions. This week is the liberation of our selves and souls. Giving our whole selves in response to Jesus giving Jesus' whole self to us, willingly.

The unknown writer of Psalm 91 put words to the song of our hearts, when we make the Lord our refuge, everything changes. It does not make everything easy or perfect but there is a promise. We will never, never be alone.

So then how do we live? With intention and beauty. Living out our call instead of just filling slots in prescribed ministry roles. If you are in a joyful place of ministry, I want to hear about it. If you are ready to discern how else you might live, because it isn't serving you anymore, I want to know about it too.

The JOY of the lord is our strength, not the busyness of the Lord. How you live out your life matters to me... to God... to those around you. I encourage you to make it as beautiful... And joyful... and meaningful as possible. Our joy is contagious here within the Messiah and out in the world.

The poet and pastor, Jan Richardson, captures this world in her poem titled “**And the Table Will Be Wide**”

And the table
will be wide.

And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.

And we will come
unhindered and free.

And our aching
will be met
with bread.

And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.

And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And WE will become bread
for a hungry world.

And WE will become drink
for those who thirst.

And the blessed
will become the blessing.

And everywhere
will be the feast.

So let us feast dear ones, on the meal... on the life that is meant for us in Jesus.
Amen.