Count Your Blessings

Good morning.

*May green be the grass you walk on,*

*May blue be the skies above you,*

*May pure be the joys that surround you, and*

*May true be the hearts that love you.*

As we narrow the search for our interim Pastor, we once again face a week without a Pastor and it falls to me to fill in. Most of know that this is the 3rd time for me to lead Worship and it is not something I have done in the past.

Typically, we draw the Sermon, the readings and the hymns from the Lectionary, but being somewhat short on Sermon experience I have chosen to take a part of our Worship and analyze it, with analogies to everyday life for understanding.

We did the “taking out the LIGHT of Christ” with analogies drawn to lighthouses and the “lower lights”.

Then we did the Apostles Creed and the value in that creed for finding our Faith.

Today I want to talk about my favorite part of the Worship Service, ………………….the end!

In my younger days, I thought the benediction just marked the end of the worship service. Perhaps the musicians needed a cue to prepare for the postlude. Perhaps the Acolyte needed time to return to the back of the Sanctuary. Or maybe the Pastor needed one last shot at reminding us to be faithful.

However, I have come to understand that the Benediction is actually a special **blessing**.

It is a request for peace, for good fortune and for comfort as we leave this place of Worship.

It connects us to God while we are apart from one another, and reminds us of………….. **his blessings**!

It is a reminder for us to extend our Christian behavior as we send each other out into the world.

The English word “benediction” is derived from the Latin words *bene* which means “good” and *diction*which means “words.” GOOD WORDS. In a religious context, it would refer to good words spoken to another on behalf of God. In other words, it is a blessing and not a prayer because it is directed to people rather than to God.

Today, I have come to value the benediction as one of my favorite parts of Sunday morning. I feel armed with good thoughts for the coming week. With a reminder of the **blessing**s God gives us, And with the **blessings** of you all to help me with whatever may come my way.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order, it says:

The service concludes with a formal dismissal. This may include a charge to the people to go into the world in the name of Christ. It shall include words of **blessing**, using a trinitarian benediction or other words from Scripture, such as:

*God* ***blesses*** *us so that we can be a* ***blessing*** *to others. We go out to follow Jesus in the world — to show and tell the good news of God to everyone.*

And let’s not forget that the Benediction, the blessing is the only thing between us and lunch at The Olive Garden so it typically short.

The Irish have taken the **blessing** to an art form. They have adapted the Worship **blessing** to be words of wisdom that send people home from all kinds of gatherings. They have a **blessing** for everything. Weddings, travel, friendship, the home, good luck, children, their country and long life. You name it and there’s probably an Irish **blessing** for it. Their lovable unconscious sense of humor provides us with some of the most wonderful blessings of all:

*May you have Walls for the wind, a roof for the rain, and drinks bedside the fire.*

*Laughter to cheer you, and those you love near you, and all that your heart may desire.*

Or Perhaps:

*May the road rise up to meet you.*

*May the wind always be at your back.*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face, and rains fall soft upon your fields.*

*And until we meet again, May God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

The Church of Scotland has a great **blessing**, it’s one of my favorites but………..needs a little translation.

It talks about leaving Church at the end of Worship rather than hanging out with others in the spirit of Fellowship.

It talks about recognizing that the person sitting beside you may be in need of some friendship or companionship.

It reminds us that Church is more than a Sunday morning Worship and that any one of us can be a blessing to others, an unexpected angel.

Their word for Church in the Church of Scotland is “Kirk”.

To “bide a wee” is to stay a while

To be “cauld and still” is to be cold and unwelcoming.

*Be ye our angel unawares, if after Kirk ye bide a wee,
There's some would like to speak te ye, if after Kirk ye rise and flee,
We all seem cauld and still te ye, but the one that's in the seat with ye, is stranger here than ye, maybe.
All here have got their fears and cares, add ye your soul unto our prayers, be ye our angel unawares.*

But **blessings** can also be for things other than people.

Every year we have a “**Pet Blessing**” here at First Presbyterian. We also have a “**Backpack blessing**” to prepare our children for returning to school.

In coastal towns in England, they have an annual “**blessing of the Boats**”, when all fishing boats and life boats are blessed. The life-boat is the rescue boat that goes out in storms to rescue other boats in destress. Something like the US Coastguard, but all volunteers.

Next week, as they do every year on December 8, in St Mary's Church in Scarborough, in the UK, a service is held called “The Blessing of the Boats”. It is to remember the tragedy that occurred on that day in 1954.

At 11.40am on 8 December 1954, the Scarborough life boat put to sea in a tremendous storm, to help fishing boats known to be at sea.

Despite the terrible storm the lifeboat located and escorted 7 fishing boats safely to Scarborough harbor. But 3 more boats remained and so they put out into the storm one more time.

The skipper or Coxswain was John Sheader and beside him his nephew Bill Sheader. Six other men made up the 8 man crew.

By that time, the gale had become severe and was blowing against an ebb tide, causing steep, breaking waves up to 15ft high. Heavy cloud, driving spray and sleet greatly reduced visibility. The remaining 3 fishing boats had found refuge in neighboring Whitby harbor and so the lifeboat was called home.

At 4.45pm, the lifeboat started to make a wide turn ready for the run in to the harbor entrance. Scarborough is not an easy port to get into in a fierce gale as there are some very strong cross currents. As the lifeboat approached the harbor for the eighth time that day, with only 200 yards to go to safety, a gigantic wave smashed over the boat, capsizing the boat and throwing all 8 men into the sea.

The boat, it was designed to do, righted itself, but only 5 men managed to get back on board. Despite their search for the others they had to give up and return home.

The bodies of John Cammish, Frank Bayes and John Sheader were washed ashore later that day.

More than 50 fishermen were saved that day by the crew of the lifeboat but at a cost of three of their own.

These 3 men and 14 others who died over the years, in the service of the Scarborough lifeboat are remembered each year. The “Blessing of the Boats” is taken from Psalm 23 but is a special **blessing** for the boats and the people in them.

So let’s join the congregation if St. Mary’s with a Blessing of the Boats.

The Lord is my Pilot I shall not drift.

He lights me across the dark waters.

He steers me in deep channels.

He keeps my log, and guides me by the stars of holiness, for his names sake.

Even though I sail mid thunders and tempests

I will dread no danger, for you are with me.

Your love and care shelter me

You prepare a safe harbor before me in the homeland of eternity.

Surely sunlight and starlight will be with me in the voyage I take

And I will rest in the port of my God forever.

But when we receive the **blessing** at the end of Worship, I am reminded that there is another meaning for the **Blessing**.

**Blessings** are gifts given to us by God. Sometimes we can forget just how many blessings we have and need to be reminded.

It is a **blessing** to be alive, to be healthy.

It is a **blessing** to here in Church with our Church family.

It was a **blessing** for all of us to be with our families last week and give thanks for that **blessing.**

And it is a **blessing** to have the privilege of sharing our gifts and talents each week as we offer them to God.

Blessings are truly gifts from God and 2 of the most important **blessings** we can teach our children are about roots and wings.

Roots to hold them firm in the family, to keep them safe as the world changes around them, to remind them that there is always a place here. But also wings, when they are ready to break free of those roots and find their own way in life, knowing that they can always come back to their roots.

We too can provide each other with those same two **blessings**. Our root system is this congregation that holds us together binding us to each other in faith. Our wings allow us to be individuals, to have a voice, an opinion, and maybe even to have the audacity to dare to preach knowing that however you do your message will be welcomed.

I have no idea who wrote these words…………

*If I could give you just two things,*

*One would be Roots, the other, Wings.*

*Roots, not to tie you to the ground,*

*But to guide you to fulfillment found.*

*The nourishing start, the firm foundation,*

*The source of your determination.*

*Wings to bypass obstacles, wings to fly free,*

*Wings to glide to the heights of the best you can be.*

*And when obstacles loom, from your Roots grows a hand*

*Providing a strong, and safe place to land.*

*I’d choose these two things for the gifts that are best,*

*For with Roots and with Wings, you’ll find all the rest!*

Nature can teach us a lot about **blessings** that have been given by God. We only have to look around us and open our minds to the wonders of God’s creation, to see that the very existence of nature is based on his **blessings**.

The largest living thing on the planet, is not a whale or an elephant, as you might imagine. It is the Giant Sequoia tree of Northern California.

The largest of the sequoias are as tall as an average 26-story building, and their diameters at the base exceed the width of many city streets. The root system of a single tree can spread over 10 acres. One of the most amazing things about these trees is that they grow from a seed that is one tenth of an ounce.

The largest named tree is General Serman in the Sequoia National Park. Standing 275 feet high with a base diameter of 36 feet, it contains 52,000 cubic feet of wood and the bark can be 2 feet thick. It is estimated to weigh 2,000 tons and be 2,500 years old.

So, what does this magnificent tree teach us about **blessings**?

To answer that we must look not at the tree itself but the root system. Spreading out over 10 acres these shallow roots intertwine with the roots of the surrounding trees creating a massive root system that supports all of the trees in the forest. A single tree could not stand alone but together they grow tall and strong. This is their support system.

But what if…………………………..

**What if** each of us here today was a giant Redwood tree and our root system spread to everyone else? We would all be bound together and stronger together. **What if** our root system, our support system, was our faith, and that faith was made stronger by the faith of those around us? **What if** by leaning on each other, by supporting each other, by helping each other grow in faith, we became a more united body of Christ? **What a blessing**!

**What if** the trees thick bark that protects it from fire and pests was our collective faith protecting us from external forces that seek to alienate and challenge us? **What a blessing**!

**What if** Worshiping together, taking Bible study together, having Fellowship events together, was the nourishment for our root system, our faith?

**What if humanity** could learn from this lesson?

One heart, one soul, one world united rather than divided. **What a blessing indeed**!

We have many things going on here that are **blessings** and support that root system.

The Fellowship team have arranged 6 Fellowship events in the past 6 months, one a month. We know that it matters not what the subject is, whether it is The British Royal Family, Making Macarons or a Pot-luck supper. The subject is immaterial, the purpose is Fellowship and Fellowship is about roots and roots are a **blessing**.

Bible study and Sunday School provide safe and respectful dialogue around matters of Faith and in the process help us build bonds or roots and once again a **blessing**.

Children’s time and the Youth Ministry with Miss Susan is a perfect example of teaching our children about roots and wings. To help them feel secure in this body of Christ but to have the courage to be an Acolyte or sing at a musical evening. Surely our Church children are a **blessing**.

Music that bridges both traditional and contemporary genres’ that finds similarities and mutual passions in all of us. When, so beautifully presented by Alan and Janet can truly be root forming and wing generating.

A musical **blessing**!

Some **blessings** have broken free from Church and become part of Fellowship at home. They are often spoken or sung at the end of a gathering. You will recognize some of them:

We all sang Auld Lang Sign to wrap up our recent musical evening. **It’s a musical blessing**.

My all time favorite blessing was actually a song. It was written by Helen Mary, in 1927 and set to music by May Brahe. Many people have recorded it but none more inspiring, more stirring or more meaningful than the Welch Tenor Sir Harry Secomb. Spoken or sung at the end of a gathering this song blesses the home and the people gathering in it. In our case today it blesses this Church, this house of God, and those of us gathered in Worship.

I thought about singing it but my voice is just not good enough maybe Alan will treat us to it one Sunday

*Bless this house, O Lord, we pray. Keep it safe by night and day.*

*Bless these walls so firm and stout, Keeping want and trouble out.*

*Bless the roof and chimney tall, Let thy peace lie over all.*

*Bless the doors that they may prove ever open to joy and love.*

*Bless the windows shining bright, Letting in God's heavenly light.*

*Bless the hearth a-blazing there, With smoke ascending like a prayer.*

*Bless the people here within, keep them pure and free from sin.*

*Bless us all, that one day we, may dwell, Oh Lord, with Thee.*

*And with that all God’s people said……………….Amen*