**Leading Causes of Life: Blessing and Hope**

October 18, 2020

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Texts: Genesis 27:28-29, Genesis 32:24-29; Romans 5;1-5, 8:18-25

For the past two weeks we’ve been talking about a group of behaviors or values we’re calling “leading causes of life” following a book by the same title by co-authors Gary Gunderson, a Baptist layperson working for a large Methodist healthcare system and the Rev. Larry Pray, a United Church of Christ pastor. They are both interested in the intersection of health and faith, an intersection that is at the heart of what the Bible describes as *shalom*: wholeness in our bodily health, peace in our relationships, wellness in our emotions and our finances, and connection with our spirituality. This is the kind of life that they are looking for—abundant life, a full life, life characterized by zest, and wellness, purpose, and joy. And what are the causes of this sort of life? According to Gunderson and Pray, there are five fundamental conditions that, woven together, create abundant life:

* connection-with God, with other people, with our deepest self, and with earth;
* coherence-a sense of meaning in the world, and in our own lives;
* agency-a conviction about our own effectiveness and ability to impact the world;
* blessing-intergenerational connection and legacy
* hope-feeling connected to and part of God’s hopes for the world.

Today, we are talking about blessing and hope. What exactly do Gunderson and Pray understand by blessing? First, let’s notice that it is blessing and not blessings. Next, let’s understand that blessing is used in the sense of passing along a sense of generational connection, value, and legacy. In this way, blessing can be generative, life-giving, and it doesn’t only go from parent to child.

Our stories from Genesis illustrate this sense of generative blessing. Such a blessing is substantive. Just a refresher about the family dynamics in this story: Abraham was the patriarch of many nations; his son was Isaac; and Isaac, with Rebekah, had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was the younger and was favored by his mother; Esau, the elder, was favored by his father. By the way, if you ever want to read about why parents shouldn’t play favorites among their children, the book of Genesis has a couple of great examples, including this one.

Jacob had already negotiated with Esau to win his inheritance rights. And now, when Rebekah overhears that Isaac is going to grant a blessing to Esau, she conspires with Jacob to steal that blessing. They succeed in fooling Isaac, whose vision is failing, into believing that he is blessing Esau when he says, in Genesis 27:28-29

***28****May God give you
        showers from the sky,
        olive oil from the earth,
        plenty of grain and new wine.****29****May the nations serve you,
        may peoples bow down to you.
Be the most powerful man among your brothers,
        and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.
    Those who curse you will be cursed,
        and those who bless you will be blessed.”*

When Esau shows up, ready for his blessing, Isaac is horrified to realize that he has already given the blessing to Jacob that he had intended for Esau. Esau, grieving, asks “Have you only one blessing, Father?” and Isaac does give him a blessing, but not the blessing he had intended for Esau.

So what is a blessing? And how do Gunderson and Pray understand and describe the concept? Gunderson writes, “I’m trying to describe the kind of generative, emergent, productive process that happens across the relationships among multiple generations. The link between the generations generates…Life depends on relationship that are channels of blessing among the whole,…I am talking about a more fundamental life issue—the flow between generations that sustains the life of all of us now and of those to come…We need what we already have—a deep sense of the primal need to be a blessing to those who come behind us, and a deep sense of accountability to those who have come before.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Of course, they are describing what happens in the best circumstances in families—parents bless their children, children become a blessing to their parents, and bless future generations. This raises a couple of questions that Gunderson and Pray don’t consider—the first one is, what about when that doesn’t happen? How do we fit into that flow when we don’t receive that sense of blessing from our parents? And the second question, is similar: what about when we don’t have children to pass the blessing on to? In the real world, either or both of these happen sometimes…life isn’t always so neat. Even in healthy families, when parents have the best of intentions, children don’t always feel the blessing. Family life is complicated—actually, life is complicated—and for a variety of reasons, parents aren’t always able to pass along the blessing. Perhaps they never received it fully themselves; perhaps the parenting experience has been complicated; perhaps something else in life (their marriage, a job crisis, or world circumstances) interferes with the parents’ ability to fully and freely bless their children. Sometimes parents die before they can do that for their children. Even Olympian runners can drop the baton in a relay race—we all know that the blessing doesn’t always get passed fully from parents to children, and that we don’t all have children to whom to pass the blessing. So what then?

That’s when the second story about Jacob comes in. The other story from Genesis is also about Jacob. It takes place around 20 years later in chapter 32 of Genesis. Following the earlier episode, Esau had threatened to kill Jacob, who fled and went away to live with his uncle. He married, had many children, built up his wealth, and eventually decided to return home and try to reconcile with his brother. The night before seeing his brother, he sent his family and servants across the river.

***24****But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke.****25****When the man saw that he couldn’t defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob’s thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob’s thigh as he wrestled with him.****26****The man said, “Let me go because the dawn is breaking.”*

*But Jacob said, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.”*

***27****He said to Jacob, “What’s your name?” and he said, “Jacob.”****28****Then he said, “Your name won’t be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won.”*

***29****Jacob also asked and said, “Tell me your name.”*

*But he said, “Why do you ask for my name?” and he blessed Jacob there.*

Jacob apparently still in his own heart had not received the blessing—and so it was when he was by himself, on the eve of his meeting with his brother, that he engaged the struggle within and with God. Many of us might have some inner wrestling or wrestling with God to do in order to come to a sense of blessing, of being beloved, of being God’s child. This may be the journey of a lifetime, or a shorter journey to our own identity. There are a lot of ways to do this inner work—in therapy, in our search to discern the meaning of our life, in spiritual work by ourselves or with a spiritual companion. And like Jacob, we will likely be forever marked by the wrestling—we may limp in some way or another, or perhaps a better way to say it is that in fully owning and understanding our blessedness, we also become aware of some of our deep vulnerability—and knowing both of these bring us wholeness—that *shalom* that I referred to earlier.

And how do we pass along that blessing? We don’t all have children, after all. Ned Hallowell is a psychiatrist, probably best known for his books on attention deficit disorder and worry. Several years ago Hallowell studied happiness, and presented his findings in a book called *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness.* Hallowell uses the word “happiness” to mean that confidence that life is trustworthy – the sense that was described by the old hymn as “It is well with my soul.” *Shalom* might be another word to describe this sense of wellness. The first condition to being able to reach adulthood with this sense of wellness is *unconditional love*, says Hallowell. He acknowledges that ideally, most people will receive this from their parents. Eighteen years ago, I heard Dr. Hallowell speak on this topic, and I still remember what he had to say. He described this unconditional love as a child seeing the light of welcome and delight in an adult’s eyes. And, he said, although ideally this will come at home, it can be made up elsewhere. Other adults in the community are important in creating that sense of safety and connection for children. Teachers, coaches, scout leaders, and adults in the church can be lifelines for children…or better yet, lovelines, who can help children develop a sense of being welcomed and accepted... indeed being beloved and blessed. And we can do it for each other as well. This is who we are called to be as the beloved community – we are the people who know ourselves to be children of God living in the delight and welcome of the Creator, and so we extend that sense of belovedness and blessing to each other and to everyone we meet. It is what Jesus told us to do in some of his closing words to his disciples, *I give you a new commandment – love one another, as I have loved you.* [John 13:34]

And indeed, it is that sense of wholeness, of wellness, of blessedness that enables us to most fully embody God’s hope for the world. Paul writes about the connection between God’s grace—that trust that we are loved—and hope in Romans 5:1-5.

***5****Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.****2****We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory.****3****But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance,****4****endurance produces character, and character produces hope.****5****This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

And Paul writes more about how our hope is not purely individual, but is connected to the hope of all creation in Romans 8:18-25.

***18****I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us.****19****The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God’s sons and daughters.****20****Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope****21****that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God’s children.****22****We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now.****23****And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free.****24****We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see?****25****But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.*

We are God’s children. And we are called to bless others, and to embody hope. Hope isn’t just an attitude, it is an action—as David Orr wrote, “…hope is the faith that things will work out whatever the odds. Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. Hopeful people are actively engaged in defying or changing the odds.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is how we embody hope—if we want a kinder world, we become kind. If we want a just world, we work for justice. If we want a sustainable world, we live sustainably. And as we spend time with God in prayer, we listen in our hearts, minds, and souls for God’s hope, and then embody that. And so we live into hope, as God’s children, passing along the gift of belovedness and blessing to our own children, to the children in church, to the children in our neighborhood and our community, to the people we meet along the way, so that our words, our actions, our lives will say to other people and to all creation, “You are loved, you are blessed. You are God’s Child.” Please listen as our choir sings the song that we sing after every baptism, a song that was sung by another choir at my ordination 23 years ago—an anthem that reminds each of us, “You are God’s Child.” Amen.

1. Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009) 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David W. Orr, “Optimism and Hope in a Hotter Time,” *Conservation Biology, Volume 21, No. 6,* page 1392, ©2007 Society for Conservation Biology. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)