

## ***The Old Shall Bless the Young***

Luke 2:21-40

Several months ago, a poignant and meaningful experience occurred for the family of one of our senior members, a day or two before she passed away. Before she lapsed into her final rest, she met with her daughters and sons and grandchildren individually to express to each of them what they meant to her personally and what she hoped they would do with their life upon her departure. I became aware of this because I was in and out of the house over the last days of her life.

What I'm told was this beloved mother and grandmother conveyed a love that would not let

them go even beyond her death. Perhaps what each one heard were some of the most significant words and thoughts they had ever received or would ever remember, mainly because these moments became the final blessing of this family's matriarch to those who had been given the gift of life through her. To my knowledge, none of them shared with another what was said to them alone—it would be their private remembrance and moment with one they loved, each in their own way. It must have been a beautiful moment to behold, mixed with sadness and deep, abiding appreciation. One generation blessing another.

As a pastor, I wish more families could and would experience this sort of passing on the mantle of life. So many avoid the strange mystery of recognizing and embracing a loved one's inevitable death to the detriment of each one—the one who is dying and wanting to bring the end of their days to a meaningful close and those who miss the opportunity to experience love in a powerful and transcendent way.

The ancient custom of offering a blessing to another has always been held in sacred importance, particularly of the elders bestowing grace upon the children and grandchildren who follow them in years. Most cultures have formal

or informal ways of the old offering a blessing upon the young, as universally, the cycle of life is understood and accepted as the normal pattern for how life plays out. We are born, we grow up through childhood and youth into our adult years; then, we give way to the natural decline that comes with age until we reach the time when our bodies grow weary and are unable to contain the spirit that lies within. As it will happen for us all, our spirits then are destined to fly free of mortality, with a lightness of being akin to angels. Or so we believe.

The act of blessing those who follow us is a generous expression of love and consideration

for those who are yet to take their journey through life. It reminds me of when I climbed the White Mountains in New Hampshire in my youth. As we would ascend a trail toward the summit, we often met hikers descending from the same. Most of the time it was a short greeting in passing by each other, but frequently it would include fair warning about some challenge further along the trail—wisdom from on high, so to speak—or it would simply be well wishes from those who had already traveled that path. The experience and perspective of the one descending was helpful and instructive to those who were just embarking on the journey that lay

ahead. It benefited those climbing since they then learned from others further along the way, who were considerate and encouraging, sharing insights from their own experiences. It was life wisdom doled out on a mountainside—a perfect illustration of elders blessing children on their way through life.

The story of Christmas follows a similar pattern in this charming account of the two elders in the Jerusalem temple offering their blessing upon the child Jesus at his *brit milah*, or circumcision, when he ceremonially entered into the covenantal relationship with God. It was a birth ritual made holy and sacred for

Jesus' family through what both Simeon and Anna said to Mary and Joseph about their child.

For Luke, the descriptions of both elders alluded to the historical twelve tribes of Israel—Simeon being one of the original brothers of Joseph, Anna coming from the tribe of Asher, as well as the geographical entirety of ancient Israel, from the northern border land of Asher to the southernmost tribal land of Simeon. It was as if the whole of Israel's land and history were uniting symbolically in this one moment to bless the child who would rise to become their strong deliverer. Hence, the old shall bless the young in their sacred narrative.

The blessing of Jesus follows the pattern well-established throughout the Hebrew canon, where from the patriarchs to the prophets, blessings were significant ways in which God's will and human destiny often came together. The most notable ones are found in Genesis, particularly that of Isaac upon Jacob (intended for Esau):

*May God give you the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.*

*Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you.*

*Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!*

However, once the ruse was discovered by Esau (for whom this was intended), Isaac's blessing could not be taken back and consequently, Esau received from his father what would come to characterize the lower status Esau's descendants would have under the rule of Israel:

*See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high.*

*By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother;*

*But when you break loose, you shall break  
his yoke from your neck.*

Later in Genesis, the final blessings of Jacob, quite fascinating in their nature, offered insight into the fate and character of the twelve tribes—some that would survive and claim the throne of Israel, while others would disappear altogether as a people. For the ancients, the notion of the elders blessing or cursing the young determined the destiny of the one in question, since it was believed to be divinely inspired.

We, of course, are not so superstitious about the effect of such rituals; instead, we view blessings as a way to express love, affection, and

compassion to those who follow us. The beauty of such is that they tie generations together in relationship—one building upon the experiences of another. However we choose to quantify history—as a linear progression through time, or in a cycle of life being renewed with each generation—the blessing of an elder upon those who are younger serves as a tie that binds them through time. They provide an element of continuity that negates the notion that children are autonomous from parents or grandparents or great-grandparents. Biologically, of course, the DNA within us maintains this continuity; spiritually, though, it comes through recognition

of this sacred bond that threads through each one's life often evidenced by shared values, abiding love and respect, and a sense of connectedness that defies even geographical distance.

It's one reason we are so interested in genealogy. We are intrigued by the ties that bind the generations together and how that sense of connectedness transcends the natural barriers of time and circumstance. It's something to ponder, appreciate, and claim as one of the enduring sources of meaning to our lives.

As we bring the year 2014 to a close in a few days and pass onto the succeeding twelve

months of 2015, let me recognize all the ties that bind the young and the old, families and friends together in a community spirit that makes us better as people. You might consider how the old shall bless the young in your own families.

In that spirit, allow me to offer a few traditional blessings that come to us from various cultural and religious sources—sayings that cross the ages and stages of life articulating the best interests and wishes of the giver to the recipient. You may recognize some you've offered or received yourself.

*May the road rise to meet you,*

*May the wind be always at your back,*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face,*

*The rain fall soft upon your fields,  
And until we meet again,  
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.*

--Irish Blessing

*May you be filled with loving kindness.  
May you be well.  
May you be peaceful and at ease.  
May you be happy.*

--Ancient Tibetan Buddhist Blessing

*May the blessing of God rest upon you,  
May his peace abide within you,  
May his presence illuminate your heart,  
Now and forevermore.*

--Sufi Blessing

*May there always be work for your hands  
to do;  
May your purse always hold a coin or two;  
May the sun always shine upon your  
windowpane;*

*May a rainbow be certain to follow each  
rain;  
May the hand of a friend always be near to  
you,  
And  
May God fill your heart with gladness to  
cheer you.*

--Irish Blessing

*May the love that is in my heart  
Pass from my hand to yours.*

--Traditional American Grace

And my blessing to you is, may the year that lies  
before you bring you all the joy, inspiration,  
hope, and mercy that will carry you safely onto  
the next.