

September 9, 2007

John 16:4b-15

BENEDICTION

By Mark A. Bayert

When I was ordained on July 7, 1968 in Washington, Iowa, my first official act as a minister of word and sacrament was to pronounce the benediction at the end of the service. Likewise today, my last official act before I retire from active ministry will be to speak God's blessing on you. It is a great privilege to do so.

Over the years church members have occasionally asked me for a copy of the words I normally use for the "charge" that immediately precedes the benediction: "Go out into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold on tightly to what is good. Return to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all persons. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit." I discovered this statement early in my ministry in the 1970 *Worshipbook* and have been using it ever since. (It's also found, by the way, in our current Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*.) The phrases come from several Scripture sources, primarily I Thessalonians 5 (one of our epistle lessons this morning) and Romans 12.

By including the charge as well as the benediction as part of the rite of dismissal, the congregation is reminded that worship on Sunday morning is not an escape or retreat from the world but, rather, nurtures and strengthens the church for its life in the world. The charge reminds us of our mission, alerts us to our responsibility of carrying our faith from the sanctuary out into the streets.

The charge is followed by the benediction or blessing. It is significant that the pastor does not wish the congregation "good luck," that phrase we so frequently and thoughtlessly use in our daily life. As Christians, we do not believe, officially at least, that life is governed by luck or chance, even though it often appears that way. We believe rather in the Sovereign God who is involved in our lives, most often admittedly in hidden ways, and whose purpose will triumph in the end.

Although the benediction signals the ending of corporate worship, it is future-oriented: it affirms that the God who has guided and provided for us in the past, showering us with untold mercies, can be counted on to be with us in the days to come. In the benediction we are assured of God's continuing presence and good will no matter what we do or where we go. The benediction also affirms that the God who sends us out into the hurting world to spread the gospel of reconciliation and work for peace and justice will equip us with God's Spirit for the task. The effect of this blessing is to sign the congregation with the divine name, the name of

the triune God in which we were baptized and by which we live and serve. At the conclusion of each worship service, we are thus reminded of who we are and to whom we belong.

The pastor or priest says the blessing with hands extended over the people. It is important to understand that hands extended over a group of people has the same meaning as the laying on of hands upon the head of one person, as we do in baptism, confirmation, ordination and the service of wholeness.

In recent years, I have added the sign of the cross at the end of the blessing. You need to know that this sign does not belong to the Roman Catholic Church exclusively. It is also used by Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran and other Christians. Throughout my ministry I have encouraged church members to be more ecumenical in their approach to worship and to take advantage of the rich heritage of the universal church. Even though, the sign of the cross has been abused and trivialized by baseball players in the batter's box or basketball players at the free throw line, I encourage us to use it in our private prayer and family table graces. It's a way of reminding ourselves of our identity as Christ's people, that we have been "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:19). Such gestures, as well as colorful banners and paraments and the sacraments themselves, affirm that God made us as physical as well as spiritual beings.

In pronouncing the benediction and extending hands of blessing over the people, the minister is merely acting as a messenger or representative of God. The pastor or priest does not have any inherent power to bless people. Clergy are not more holy than the laity, in spite of the title "Reverend." While they are called to be special instruments of God's grace, the role of ministers nonetheless is simply to announce and assure the congregation of God's blessing, God's faithfulness. The same holds true, by the way, when pastors declare God's forgiveness to the people, following the corporate confession of sin.

In our lesson from Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi, the apostle begins with a blessing, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In all his travels, Paul never forgot the congregations he had organized. He sometimes made follow-up visits. He kept them in his prayers and occasionally sent them letters (part of what we now call the New Testament epistles) to answer questions and encourage them in their faith. From prison, near the end of his life, he sent a thank you letter to the Philippians, his favorite congregation. And after his initial blessing, he writes these beautiful words, which as I read them to you I want you to understand are my words to you: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now; I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." And so Paul entrusted the Philippians to God's care and keeping, even as I do you. I will never forget you and will hold you up to God

in my prayers, even as I have the other congregations I have served in Washington, Iowa; Rock Island, Illinois; and Bismarck, North Dakota.

Our reading from John 16 is part of Jesus' upper room discourse in which he prepares his disciples for his imminent departure. As part of his farewell speech, our Savior makes this remarkable statement: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you."

Reflecting on these words of Jesus, the late Henri Nouwen in his book, *The Living Reminder*, observes, "The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming, but also by his leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ's absence that our intimacy with him is so profound that we can say that he dwells in us, call him our food and drink, and experience him as the center of our being." [Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, Seabury, 1977, p. 42.]

Father Nouwen then applies this insight to the church's ministry of pastoral care. In our hospital visits and home visits, it is essential for patients and parishioners to experience that it is good for them, not only that the pastor or deacon comes but also that he or she leaves. "In this way," he says, "the memory of our visit can become as important, if not more important, than the visit itself. I am deeply convinced that there is a ministry in which our leaving creates space for God's spirit and in which, by our absence, God can become present in a new way." But he adds, "There is an enormous difference between an absence after a visit and an absence which is the result of not coming at all. Without a coming there can be no leaving, and without a presence absence is only emptiness and not the way to greater intimacy with God through the Spirit." [*The Living Reminder*, pp. 44-45.] I would build on Henri Nouwen's comments by suggesting that when friends say goodbye to each other or when a pastor leaves a congregation, it is only in that absence, only from the perspective of distance, that they can more fully appreciate what they have meant to each other.

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis 31 is from the farewell scene of Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, and includes the well-known Mizpah Benediction: "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." The Presbyterian Women's group at Central Church, Rock Island, used to close each meeting by holding hands in a circle and repeating this benediction. But if you examine the context of the statement, you will realize that it is actually more of a warning than a blessing. Jacob and Laban were both cunning men, and each had successfully cheated the other in their past relationship. These guys couldn't trust each other when their backs were turned! So now as they say goodbye, they make an uneasy truce or covenant. And they call on God to be the referee: "The Lord's got his eye on you, buddy, so don't try any tricks, don't think you can get away with anything just because we're miles apart."

But for centuries the church has used this statement in a positive instead of negative way, as a blessing, not a warning, a blessing spoken between people who care about each other and will miss each other. And that is how I use it now: “May the Lord watch between you and me while we are absent one from the other.”

In another of his books, *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen tells of the time a former student and good friend came back to Yale Divinity School for a visit. After catching up on what was going on in each other’s lives, they lapsed into silence, not an embarrassing silence but a companionable silence. And now I’m going to quote from the book, using Father Nouwen’s own words to describe the end of the conversation: “Then he said, ‘It is good to be here’ and I said, ‘Yes, it is good to be together again,’ and after that we were silent again for a long period. And as a deep peace filled the empty space between us, he said hesitantly, ‘When I look at you, it is as if I am in the presence of Christ.’ I did not feel startled, surprised or in need of protesting, but I could only say, ‘It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘He indeed is in our midst,’ and then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years, ‘From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.’” [Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Doubleday, 1975, p. 31.] Yes, all the ground between us will be holy ground.