

Blessed to Be a Blessing
Bill Chadwick, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 2:8-9: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Genesis 12: 1-4a Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...

Last week’s recognition of Oak Grovers who had been married fifty years or more made me think a lot about what kind of good fortune goes into that. Which got me to thinking about related issues. So here’s a potpourri of think-withs this morning.

After many months (and thousands of dollars’ worth) of marriage counseling, my first wife and I finally ended our marriage. It was extraordinarily painful for both of us.

For the most part, the congregation I was serving at the time was extremely gracious; especially since it was the 1980s, when divorce was less common among clergy than it is today.

But that graciousness didn’t change the fact that I had failed at the most important thing in my life. On top of the personal pain, I was also incredibly embarrassed. I really didn’t want to talk about it with anyone, certainly not with my parishioners.

Unfortunately, my parishioners didn’t always feel the same way. Many of them couldn’t help but provide sincere, well-meaning comments: “Mary and I have learned that a successful marriage takes forgiveness above all things”; or “Ralph and I committed to never going to bed angry.” That sort of thing. Well intended. Not terribly helpful. Not at *all* helpful.

A couple of months after I announced our impending divorce to the congregation, I was visiting a parishioner in the hospital. He was a regular Sunday worshipper, but a quiet guy with whom I had not become very well acquainted. Our talk at the hospital was certainly our first one-on-one conversation without his more outgoing wife and kids around.

Within a few minutes of my arrival, Don said, “You know, Bill, I haven’t had the chance to tell you how sorry I am about your divorce. That must be so hard.”

“Thanks. It is really hard.”

“You know, Kitty and I have been married for thirty years. And it’s been a really good marriage.”

And then, wait for it: “You know what the key to our success is?” Don looked up at me from his hospital bed. “Whoa boy,” I thought, looking back at him, “here it comes. What will it be this time? ‘Compromise’? ‘Hard work’? ‘Forgiveness’? The ever-popular ‘Communication’?”

I waited silently.

“Luck!” he said forcefully. “Just plain dumb luck!”

I could have kissed him . . . on the lips! This was such a word of grace to me that I almost burst into tears. Thank you, Don.

He died unexpectedly a few days later, at age sixty. I am forever grateful to him.

(As you know, my luck turned in a big way, five years later.)

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Second think-with. A famous psychologist tells the true story of a family consisting of a mom and dad and three highly successful teenage children. All three of these teens were excellent students, leaders in school and church, good athletes and musicians, simply all-around All-American kids. Someone from their local church, noting what wonderful children these parents had raised, asked the couple if they would be willing to teach a little class on parenting at church, to share the secrets of their success.

“Oh, gosh, we’re not parenting experts or anything,” they replied. “We don’t have any special training.”

“Well, you can’t argue with success,” the inquirer replied. “Just share what sorts of things you did and how they worked.”

Reluctantly, the couple agreed. They put together some ideas and presented a four-week class in their local congregation.

The class was very well received, and word spread. The couple was asked to come and share their insights with other congregations. The couple was hesitant, but they finally agreed.

Soon they were “experts” being flown all over the country to share with other parents how they had raised such prize-winning children.

Then, lo and behold, the mother of these three teenagers became pregnant. Soon the couple was in the diaper business once again, after a long layoff. And as this child grew older, it became clear he would be one of those “challenging” children. He was disobedient to his parents, got in trouble at school, and eventually ran afoul of the law. All of the tricks of the parenting trade that had worked so well with the first three children were absolutely useless with this fourth one.

And the parents said: “We have come to realize that we actually know nothing about parenting. That the first three kids turned out so well was nothing but luck!”

They stopped offering parenting classes.

Like Don’s words to me, this story is a word of grace to so many parents. We all do the best we can. Of course we do. But how the kids turn out is, to a huge and frightening extent, like so many other things out of our control. And sometimes, I believe, out of their control.

Luck.

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Think-with number 3: A few weeks back I was chatting with one of our members and we were talking about trying to save for college, the prodigious amounts that takes these days, tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. Kris and I didn’t even try; we hoped for scholarships. This parishioner said, “You know, we are so quick to think about our own kids. But what about all the other kids? What could that kind of money do for kids who don’t even have enough to eat or clothes to wear?”

Hmm.

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Think-with number 4. A few years ago, in a sermon, I mentioned a recently published study about the significant role that luck plays in business success. It was not at all the main point of the sermon, or even in my manuscript. I had thrown it in rather off-handedly at the last second.

But what a reaction it provoked from several of the successful businessmen and women in the congregation! “Luck?” they cried, confronting me after the service. “Luck?! We make our own luck in this world! It’s called ‘Hard Work’! Luck has nothing to do with success in business!”

I was dumbfounded. I hadn't received this strong of a critical reaction even to my most recent sermons homosexuality or Christian pacifism.

To one long-retired businessman who was still fuming at me three days later, I responded calmly, "Well, I was just quoting the study, but it does seem reasonable to me. For example, my younger brother was highly successful in business until this Great Recession hit. Now he's having a tough time."

The parishioner snorted. "Well, then, he's not a very good businessman, is he?"

(It was only some years later that I learned that no less a successful businessman than Warren Buffet attributed most of his success to luck. He called it "Winning the Ovarian Lottery," being born into a wonderful family and having good opportunities. Dang! I wish I had known that during this conversation with our parishioner.)

E. B. White noted, "Luck is not something you can mention in the presence of self-made men. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer said words to this effect: "Blessing does not constitute privileged status; it confers responsibility. God blesses our lives for the benefit of others, not to their exclusion." (Peter W. Marty, in *The Christian Century*, February 13, 2109, p. 3)

Many of us are familiar with the phrase, "Blessed to be a blessing." It's the very theme of the Bethel Bible Study Series that many of us were a part of decades ago. It comes from that passage from Genesis that I read: Chapter 12, verse 2: I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, *so that you will be a blessing.*

I think of my friend Lenny, who I mentioned once before, who, like most of us, used to daydream about winning the lottery. And then he went on a mission trip to rural Kenya and he realized, "I already won the lottery. Oh boy, did I win the lottery!" Most of us in this room are lottery winners. We won the ovarian lottery.

We have been blessed. How then, shall we then live?