

## **YOU ARE SPECIAL**

**LUKE 6: 17-26**

**FEBRUARY 11, 2001 – WECP 50TH ANNIVERSARY**

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Perhaps you remember Mr. Rogers' signature saying, "You are special."  
That's what I want to talk about on this anniversary day of WECP.

Auburn Theological Seminary president Barbara Wheeler says this, she says that the church exists not to teach the world what to think or even how to act – religious organizations can be as wrong about that as any other organizations – rather the church exists to perform the central task of the people of God.

God created God's beloved community says Wheeler, to persist stubbornly over time for one purpose: to give thanks. We are called to give thanks continually, to remind ourselves and to tell the world, that God is at work, saving, restoring, not just us, but the whole world that God created in love.<sup>1</sup>

Wheeler might have used as her text Genesis 12 where God says to Abraham and Sarah, "I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." It is through God's blessing us and our blessing others that God saves and restores the creation.

***Our purpose as the people of God is to give thanks for and to announce God's blessing upon all people and the entirety of creation.*** At first blush this may seem hard to swallow. The world is a cold, brutal place. Millions of people suffer unspeakable pain, oppression, and deprivation. This week's Time Magazine, for example, talks about the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Seventeen million people have died to date.

Maybe you're thinking we are far away from a world where everyone is blessed. A world where the barriers of hatred and greed are torn down so that all can experience fullness of life. But the Bible offers great hope and promise. There will come a day says the Bible, when everyone will be blessed, everyone safe: the outcast, the persecuted, the sick, the very old and the young, those who have too little power to arrange the world for their own safety.

Let me be more specific: welfare recipients, undocumented aliens, homosexual persons, convicted criminals. Every human life as valued as every other human life. The poor, the undocumented, the different, the handicapped, those who have made big mistakes are not presently safe or blessed in our society so we, the church, have our work cut out for us.

You could add to that the rest of us. My hunch is many of us do not feel blessed. If you conducted a survey you'd find that many of us are thankful for what we have. But many of us do not actually feel blessed.

I want to talk today about blessing because it is at the heart, as President Wheeler says, of our identity as the church. Yet, we have forgotten the importance and art of being a blessing to one another and to the world.

And on this WECP anniversary day what could be more important to the development of a child than to be blessed and to make sure each child knows that he or she is blessed. Without a child's receiving and knowing the blessing of a parent or the blessing of God, that child may spend their whole lives seeking approval or the substitutes of success.

Turn with me to Luke's story today. It is Jesus' "sermon on the plain," called the "sermon on the mount" in Matthew. The fact that it is given on the plain is significant for Luke.

In Luke, Jesus comes down to the level of the people, all the people.

Jesus reaches out to everyone. Intends his message for all.

It is here on the plain, the level place, where Jesus could look everyone in the eye and pronounce God's blessing. And listen whom it is he blesses: the poor, the hungry and those who weep.

***The first point this morning is that God calls us to go to the level places to bless others.*** Here's an example of what I mean. I was standing in the foyer of the Butzer Building this past week talking with some adults. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that a teacher and a stream of children were filing through the foyer, going downstairs for lunch.

Suddenly, I felt a little tug at my leg. I looked down and saw the cutest child I've ever seen. Round face, auburn hair, big smile. He was small even for a two-year old. Tugging at my pant's leg he said, "I have glasses." And indeed, he was wearing a pair of tortoise shell frames with very thick lenses. Proud as punch.

Immediately, I knelt down to his level, admired his glasses perched on his cute little nose. "You sure do have glasses," I said. "I like your glasses. You are special!" The little guy beamed then turned and stepped back into the line of students marching on their way to lunch.

Priscilla and Karen told me the boy's teacher knew he would be in school that day with new glasses. So she came to class with a bag of sunglasses for everyone. Everyone got to wear glasses on Henry's special day when he wore his new glasses for the first time.

It sounds like a small thing to us. But consider it from a two-year old perspective. The result was not a child who felt inferior or strange but a child who felt special because that teacher came to his level and to the level of every child in that class. She communicated God's blessing, each of us is unique, special and loved.

Jesus calls us to creatively go to the level of the poor, the lonely, the outcast, the children to offer God's blessing. We have our work cut out for us. We can't just open our doors and presume that because people enter the sanctuary that they will feel God's blessing. We have to go to where they are, meet them where they live, affirm their differences. Tell them they are special in words and gestures they understand.

***Point two: when we pronounce God's blessing upon others we empower them.***

This past week I received a call from a retired, disabled couple. They have to come to us for help before. They live in one of those flimsy motels on Niagara Falls Blvd. They are tenacious, bright, proud and good people. But they are very poor.

Joe is confined to a wheelchair and quite sick. He has more medical problems than you would think possible for one person to accumulate in a lifetime and a colostomy to boot. He is weak and vulnerable and susceptible to infection.

They have no car so they get around by bus. Their medicaid-assigned doctor is in Hamburg. Not an easy trek for health care. In fact there's nothing easy about their life. Least of which is the begging they must do when some minor crisis throws their carefully budgeted lives into a cocked hat.

So when they called the other day for help I listened attentively. Their plan is to move to Rochester to be closer to family. "How will you get there," I asked. "A Trailways bus," they answered. I pictured them with their life possessions in a few bags climbing on a bus. Not the way we would move. But it was a good idea I thought, and told them so.

This time they needed help with rent. So on our behalf, on behalf of the God who extends his blessing to the poor, the hungry, the outcast and those who weep, I told them we would help them. I said we would cover their last week of rent until they recovered from the flu and could move to Rochester.

Linda passed the phone to her husband and Joe asked me, "Reverend, why are you doing this for us?" "Because Joe," I said, "God loves you and so do we and God is using us right now to tell you that. To tell you that you are special." There was a long silence. Then he said, "I can't begin to tell you what this means, how important it is, how much hope and strength this gives us to go on." Blessing others empowers them with confidence and hope.

***Point three: when we bless others we fulfill God's purpose for the church and in the process we are blessed all over again.***

Let me come back to WECP. Fifty years and 5,000 students later. No doubt we have blessed many lives and families over the years through this magnificent early childhood program. But the bigger story is that in the process of fulfilling our mission with children we have discovered who God wants us to be.

That is our mission in this life. It is God's blessing us that strengthens us to extend God's blessing to others. The upward spiral of blessing and grace. It is what God envisioned for Abraham and Sarah. What God sent Jesus to do. It is our central purpose in this life. There is no greater achievement for an individual or congregation than to discover and carry out that calling, that destiny.

***Here it is again:*** God calls us to the level place to extend God's blessing to others.

When we pronounce God's blessing to the poor, the outcast, the hungry and those who weep, we give them God's strength and hope.

And in fulfilling this mission we find ourselves blessed all over again.

This is the cycle of blessing and grace that leads us always back to the level place. The place where we are called through some costly act to tell some beloved but dispossessed child of God or group of people that they are special.

Unfortunately, right now even our school is not a level place.

Going to a level place can be costly.

It costs commitment and personal sacrifice. Very often it costs cash.

We don't see children with leg braces or in wheelchairs in the Butzer building, we don't see grandparents with mobility problems in that building because it is not level. You have to climb two flights of stairs. And so, with your help, an elevator will make that building level so that Children's Hospital will be able to send the kids they want to place in our program but who can't climb the stairs.

You might say that the kitchen in the Butzer building is on level ground. Frankly, I do not know how our cooks prepare seven hundred meals a week in a space the size of our butler's pantry at home. Those cooks work uphill everyday. So, with your help, we have a real kitchen planned that will allow for food preparation in acceptable working conditions.

And there are other children, just as cute as Henry with his new glasses, out there in our city – they live on the East Side or here on the West Side near Ferguson Avenue. Some may even be across the street at the Lenox or in the apartment buildings on North and Summer and Elmwood in our backyard. But the academic field is not level for them because frankly their parents and grandparents can't afford to send them to Westminster. The tiny scholarship funds we have provide for only a few economically disadvantaged children each year. So, again, with your help we will fulfill a major vision we approved last year in our congregational vision statement. We will level the economics of admission with our scholarship fund so that more poor children can come to Westminster.

The church does not exist to teach the world what to think or how to act...the church exists to perform the central task of the people of God. To give thanks for and announce God's blessing upon all people.

That purpose began long ago when God said to Abraham and Sarah,  
"I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing...  
and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

***That's the core of our ministry – telling one another and all of God's children that they are special, very special indeed. Amen.***

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Wheeler, "Who Needs Organized Religion?" An address delivered in Columbus, Ohio September 29, 2000.