

Sunday February 1, 2026
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Meditation: “B’rakah”

In the spring of 2001 I took a unit of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). My placement was at Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, a Jewish facility, in Toronto. I was assigned to 5West in the hospital. The first week I made the rounds of the rooms, meeting the people for whom I would care for the next several weeks. I greeted one elderly woman by saying Shalom, and she said, “No! To me you will say Shalom u b’rakah.” Later in the day I asked the rabbi what it meant...

At seminary I read this book by theologian Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*. In it, Fox makes the point that long before St. Augustine developed the doctrine of original sin around the year 400, even before the “fall” when Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was the introduction of sin and separation from God, before any of it there was blessing.

In fact, according to Elie Wiesel, “the concept of original sin is alien to Jewish tradition.” Herbert Haag agrees. Haag points out that, “the doctrine of original sin is not found anywhere in the writings of the Old Testament. It is certainly not in chapters one to three of Genesis.” (which contain the two accounts of creation.)

The way that God deals with humankind is through blessing, and blessing is intimately wound up with relationship. In order for there to be blessing, there must be someone to issue a blessing and someone to receive the blessing. When we bless someone, we invest something of ourselves into the recipient of the blessing, and we cannot be the recipient of a blessing oblivious to the grace of the giver of the blessing. Blessing involves, even presupposes, relationship.

I think that blessing was the purpose, the desire behind or beneath creation itself. God, who is community, sought relationship with an 'other.' God sought an 'other' to bless. And so creation, in order for there to be an 'other' to bless and to be in relationship with.

Sigmund Mowinckel sums up what the Bible has to say about blessing when he said, "Blessing includes that which we call material as well as the spiritual. But, first and foremost, blessing is life, health, and fertility for the people, their cattle, their fields.... Blessing is the basic power of life itself." Blessing is about survival.

The prophetic tradition in the Bible, and here we can see Jesus as a prophet, is deeply a tradition of blessing. Jesus, in his sermon on the mount did not say, "Woe to those who are arrogant, self-righteous, and narcissistic, for they are admired by fools.

Woe to those who never mourn the loss of a loved one, for they have no loved ones.

Woe to those who lord it over others, for they have their reward in gold. Pitiabale are those who care only about themselves, for their own cause must be preserved at the cost of high priced lawyers, police and military, and they shall have no peace.

Woe to those who show no mercy, for they shall receive no mercy.

Woe to the warmongers, for they shall no nothing but war and strife."

Rather, Jesus' words were words of blessing; blessing in the midst of pain, hope in the face of injustice. Jesus' words of blessing are words of promise: blessed are you who are merciful, for you will be shown mercy. Jesus' words of blessing are words of hope: blessed are you mourn, for you will be comforted. Jesus' words of blessing are words of relationship: blessed are you who are pure in heart, for you will see God. Jesus' words of blessing are the language of love.

A theology of blessing is a theology about a different kind of power. It is not about the power of control, or the power of being over, but about the power of fertility, the power of creativity, the power of life and love. Blessing is politically dangerous. It builds trust and hope, which are essential ingredients by which people can deliver themselves and be instruments of a God of blessing. Blessing is politically dangerous because it seeks to share all that is good, and sharing is justice-making, and justice making brings about criticism of all that is unjust. And this is why Jesus was a threat to the powers of his day, a threat to the status quo.

The God I worship is not a God of vengeance and condemnation. The God I worship is a God of blessing. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” And so I say to you, Shalom u b’raham. May you come to know both in your life, and may you share both with the community of God’s creation. Amen.