

September 16 – Blessings – The Struggling Times

2 Corinthians 4:8-10

A few years ago, I was sitting with a man having lunch a few weeks after his wife had died following a long and debilitating illness. He was grieving the loss, as any of us would, but then he began to reflect on the journey of the past few years. He ended by saying how fortunate he felt to have experienced what he did. When he saw my surprised look, he talked about how he and his wife had not been particularly close before her diagnosis. They were both busy in retirement doing their own thing. Her illness caused them both to begin to ask what is really important. A lot of what they both did was fun but not important and so in those next months they intentionally did more together than they had ever done in their married life. They wanted to wring every moment of joy and togetherness they could out of life before the illness would make doing these things an impossibility. He felt truly blessed to have had those months of joy that might never have occurred. He talked about how his faith had grown during the last two years as he learned to trust that God was with him on the journey. And he said, “I am most grateful for the love and support I have received from friends and family. Up until the time of her illness my kids often said they loved me. I guess I thought that was what all kids say. Then she got sick and I learned what love really meant. They sacrificed time to be with us, they sent me notes of encouragement and were always asking me if there was anything else they could do. I am closer to my kids now than at any time in their lives. And, so many friends let me know my wife and I were a priority in their lives. I can’t count the number of cards we received, food dropped off, errands run for us or phone calls to just check in. None of that would have happened if I had not been experiencing what I did.” His challenging journey made him receptive to and appreciative for blessings that he was unaware were there.

This is a very Irish kind of way of looking at life, particularly the challenging times of life. Too often we consider “blessings” to be just those things that feel “good” to us. And yet, the Celtic tradition extends blessing especially to times of loss. One of the questions we are challenged to ask is what blessings might we find in those circumstances—not in spite of those circumstances but perhaps because of them? The man I talked to saw the blessings that came because of his struggles, not in spite of

them. Blessing does not deny sorrow, he still grieved mightily for his wife, but deepens our faith and moves us through it.

To appreciate how God is helping us move through the challenging times is something we all need to learn because we all experience loss. The two poems shared today beautifully capture this sense of the Holy at such times. In the first one we lifted up those who are hurting, knowing God can bring comfort and healing with an awareness that God knows our pain. This should be of great solace to us. The other talks about that Holy sacred time when we are sitting by the bedside as we prepare to bless someone into God's presence, acknowledging the Spirit that holds us all together.

Too often we see loss, and pain and suffering as punishment. We like to believe in a cause and effect world that says if I am a good person and live faithfully God will bless me. And here we mean, God will do nice things for me. If we do not experience goodness, but instead find pain and loss to be our companions, we either believe that God is not to be trusted because God did not keep the bargain, or we have failed and God is chastising us.

The Celts instead understand that we all face struggling times. They come to the faithful and the faithless, to those who strive to do good as fully as those who seek only after their own desires. The Apostle Paul saw this. He talks about how they are experiencing all kinds of troubles. Instead of going on to say, "repent of your sins" he writes how we are not crushed. We might be harassed but not abandoned. We might be knocked down, but we are not knocked out. All of this because we carry the Spirit of Jesus with us. So understanding that we will face troubles, fears, and loss but that these are not the final word is hard. But as we can embrace it we can see the blessings we are experiencing because of those struggles and it also helps us look past them to better times.

In talking with that grieving husband, I came to understand that the way to celebrate blessing is to focus on what we have gained instead of letting all the feelings of loss overwhelm us. We don't have to invite those feelings of loss into our lives. They come unbidden and often at the most unexpected of moments. You are sitting down to eat and today the empty chair causes you to cry. A letter comes and you feel down

because there is no one to share its good news with. We experience loss but to invite thoughts of blessing, of how God is present and transforming this time, is something we have to work on. We have to invite it into our lives or it will stay outside our souls unable to comfort us. So what are some of the ways we invite in blessings in the struggling times? I think of three things.

When I am going through difficult times I focus on how I am coping with the situation. An awareness that we are strong enough to deal with what we are facing is a liberating thing. Now, we need to remember that our strength comes from beyond ourselves. It is the support of family, of friends, of our faith and our church. I often say we are weak when we try to do it ourselves. We are strong when we are willing to ask for and receive help. Think about the man I was sharing with. He came to see the support of his children and his friends as an incredible gift. It was something he would not have had as part of his life if he had not gone through such a time. Whenever I pause in the midst of struggles and think about it, I see the help that is coming to me or is possible to access. This awareness fills me with profound blessings.

Also, when I am struggling, I try to be aware of the love people are sharing with me. I had a friend who was dying. Many of his friends would say, "I am praying for you." He got real angry about it and one day he said to me, "What good is prayer when you are dying?" He was having a faith crisis moment. I looked at him and said, "What they are really saying is 'I love you and so does God!'" He got quiet for a while and then tears began to fall. He then began to talk about all the nice things people were doing for him. He wasn't sure he deserved it. I told him they would not have done these things if they were forced to. They did it out of love. Then, this man who was a bit angry at God and frustrated with his friends said, "I am so blessed." Seeing how God can pour love into our lives when we are struggling helps us to not focus on the struggle, the pain, and the loss but the presence of God. We can celebrate the deepening relationships that happen because of this struggle. When we do so we will be amazed.

Finally we need to celebrate that there is joy no matter how great the sadness. When we focus on the bright moments that are so much a part of life, even in our

darkest times, we begin to realize that this moment won't last forever. Joy helps us realize that life moves on, is bigger than our problem.

I remember reading about a woman who was dealing with cancer. She had undergone surgery, was now having chemo and radiation. She was in a fight for her life, a fight the doctors were not too encouraged that she would win. She was feeling down, and who wouldn't be? She didn't feel good, medical bills were piling up, and she might die. She was laying in bed one spring day. Her husband had opened the window a bit to let in some fresh air. They were near a school and the kids were out playing. She listened to all the happy voices. All of a sudden it came to her, most of the world did not care about whether she lived or died. There was more to life than her illness. It was a liberating thought. She quit focusing on all of her concerns and began to look for moments of joy. That change improved her outlook and she is sure it helped with her surviving the ordeal. She knows that it changed family dynamics because once she started being more interested in her family and their activities instead of telling them all she was dealing with, the more they wanted to come and see her.

So troubles come with life. We can do nothing about that. But we do have a choice about how to deal with them and where to put out mental energy. When we name the blessings in our sorrow, it doesn't discount the pain but reminds us that there is more to life than this moment. Also it gives us the permission to move past this moment into new life. And if that is not how our story will be written and we are facing the end, it gives those who love us permission to move on, celebrating the joy and blessings we found each day.