

## “School of Blessing”

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

November 3, 2019

I have to set a little history today. Robin and I got engaged December 31, 1970. We set the wedding for June, 1972. About two (2) months later Robin and I changed the date to December 17, 1971 – that was ten months away. Now my mom, because I’m her son had to love me with this change – but it was touch and go for a bit.

A year later, I was a full-time student at Mac. It was the February reading week and we decided to drive and visit Robin’s mom and dad in Arizona. After we arrived, they spoiled us completely. They toured us around, showed us Dick Van Dyck’s house. There were many dinners out and fresh oranges from the orange groves. But all too soon, the holiday came to an end and we had to roll our suitcases out to the car. Audrey had made butter tarts and was giving them all to me – none for George. There were extra good-byes being said and as I hugged my mother and father-in-law, trying to honour their graciousness, these immortal words came out of my mouth: "Thanks for all the hostility."

Seconds ticked by without a giggle, my eyes bulged and I shouted, "Hospitality! Thanks for all the hospitality!" The car was strangely quiet as we pulled away. George and Audrey waved for a long time. That exchange was burned into all of our memories, because Robin and I talked about it for the next three (3) days as we drove back towards Hamilton.

Blessings. That’s what Robin and I received from our families when we moved our wedding date, when I received those butter tarts that my father-in-loved and when I blurted out that incorrect word.

Blessing can only be given, never taken. Blessing, calling God into ordinary moments that they become sacred.

Paul's words to the Thessalonians are a blessing. His words bless what the Christians in Thessalonica probably felt were ordinary, possibly even disappointing, seasons of their life together. He blessed them for loving each other, for enduring persecution, and for keeping their faith. He blessed them, reminding them that God was at work in them and that only through God's power can anything prosper. This entire letter serves as a sacred huddle in the midst of a difficult moment: "stand firm, work hard, great job." For anyone who has ever gone through tough times, we know the importance of words of blessing.

Ministers are asked to bless all sorts of things, from newborn babies to material that has a tartan look to a new car – a gift of mobility. But it is a falsehood to believe only ministers can bless things. If I were to sneeze, many of you would utter blessings right now. So, speaking words of blessing is not meant just to be holy-sounding words spoken by professionals, but what we all do all the time: recognizing God's beauty and calling God's presence into our daily lives. The book of James tells us that our words are to serve the purpose of blessing, and that our tongue is like a bridle or a rudder

that can steer the direction of our entire body. The words we say to each other matter to God.

The centrality of words was at the heart of Greco-Roman thinking. Words were what made us human, different from sparrows and oak trees and stones. Words. And from there we see how Jesus, who was God and human at the same time, was called "the Word" made flesh, the only teacher whose words were truly connected to the heart of God.

And because all of us need constant help in taming our tongue, in not saying that one thing that we can't unsay, the Bible is full of tools that train us in loving language, in compassionate speech, or simply in silence. There are prayers. There are moments of blessing from parent to child. There are dreams. There are people being still, listening to God. There is the Holy Spirit who appears in tongues of fire and helps people understand one another when before they have talked past each other.

And there are hymns. Hymns are God's way of training our tongues to bless. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to get a tune stuck in your head? Music may be the only thing that lasts longer than the sting of critical words. Music may be the only thing that fills our minds more than our grief and fears. That's why when we are most in need of God, most in need of the right words, a change of heart, we find ourselves caught up in a song. How many of you have told everyone you were doing just fine, thought that the grief or anger was gone, and during the hymn, found your eyes flooding with tears? That was the truth of God flowing through you. It is holy speech, blessing that fills us up, becoming like the rudder for our quivering spirits. And music seems to connect us again with nature: the rustle of fall leaves, the duets of frogs and crickets, the driving cadence of cicadas, as birds and rivers and animals join in with their rhythm and roll and roar.

The world blurred out, I was able to focus only on Robin's eyes as, I spoke the vows I had memorized that culminated with, "I do." In the future, I hope to be able to pronounce words of blessing upon the driver who cuts me off in traffic, the person who fights against what I believe in, and the dog who wakes me up at 3 a.m.

If you feel like your words may not sound positive, or like you aren't as excited about your job or your family or your church as Paul sounded, you don't have to start from scratch. If you aren't sure how to proceed, bless with a hymn lyric: Blessed Are You, Great Is Thy Faithfulness. Or, Your Grace Is Amazing. If you aren't sure where to start, begin as Paul did with your friends, "I give thanks for my friend Mary." If you need a reason, look at our world that cries out for even one person to stop the cycle of critique and defense with a word of blessing.

May it be so, for you and for me, this day.