Blessings in the Midst of Life

Narrative Lectionary

August 12, 2018

Luke 1: 46-55 Russell Mitchell- Walker

Ruth 4: 1-22

I invite you this morning to consider the ways in which you and we are blessed. Both scripture readings are about women who are blessed. Mary is feeling blessed in spite of being pregnant outside of marriage, because she is carrying a very special child she is to name Jesus. Ruth and Naomi were widows, and as such were pretty much none persons in their community. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem with Ruth, she would have been despised and rejected not only because she was with Ruth, who was a Moabite as Israelites and Moabites did not get along, but also because she left when there was a drought, abandoning her people. Yet into this situation, we hear in todays reading, Ruth marries Boaz, a kinsmen of Naomi, and bears a son Obed. Ruth is blessed through this marriage as well as through bearing a son for Naomi, who had no possible descendants due to the death of her sons. Obed also becomes the grandfather David, descendent of Jesus. So it is significant to note, that an outsider, a Moabite, is connected to the line of Jesus. Blessings abound in this story and in our lives.

We are blessed here in The Living Spirit Centre to be sharing this space together. In a time when too many churches and congregations are struggling to keep going, some are needing to re-envision or re-imagine what to do with their buildings which are a financial burden to them. This is not the case for us, due to our shared property arrangement. It doesn’t mean we all can easily meet our budgets, but it does mean that the struggle is much less because of the shared costs. Where others may need to look to share programs and ministry together with neighbouring congregations in order to have a critical mass for events and programs, we can look to one another to see what sharing and ministry we can do together. An example is the family ministry program called Messy Church, where families will come for crafts, worship and a meal, that we will look to offer together a few times over the next year. Sharing this space is a blessing!

We experience blessings in our faith communities as we celebrate the cycles of life together. This summer, I had the joy of officiating at the wedding of a young couple who started attending Eastside a few years ago. Bronwynn and Steve have been together for quite a few years, have two children together, and have planned to get married over the years, but kept putting it off. It was when Steve’s father was sick with cancer that they finally decided to have the ceremony. It was a wonderful outdoor service here, in the greenspace outside by the trees. It was a beautiful, celebratory service, and it is a blessing to celebrate the love between two people. It is even more of a blessing when they are people who are part of our faith community.

This past week, we had a funeral here for an active member of Eastside, Joyce Dunn. Joyce was a quiet unassuming woman who was an active volunteer and involved in a number of ways in the community and the church over the years. Her daughter described her as an example of walking in the light of love and grace. Her humility may have prevented those who knewyher casually to know all the areas that she was involved in and how much she gave to organizations she volunteered with and people she her life touched. It was a blessing to hear the stories and celebrations of a faithful life well lived in love and grace.

Within the challenges of life we can experience blessings. This summer Brian and I have been faced with the challenging news that he needs neck surgery because three discs in his neck are pinching the spinal cord, restricting the spinal fluid. We became aware of this after his bicycle accident during our trip to Australia this winter. Brian followed up from the MRI and other scans he got Australia and finally got the results from a Regina MRI just before we left on holidays. The surgeon showed him the various places that Brian’s spinal cord is being pinched, recommended surgery, and stated that it is elective surgery as he is still walking and if he never fell, he would be fine. So Brian responded: ‘so I can still go on rides with my nephews at Canada’s Wonderland?’ The surgeons’ face just dropped as he said, ‘this is much more serious than that. You are not to go on a ladder, lift anything, and avoid slippery places. If you fall or jar your neck badly you could be paralyzed from the neck down.” The surgeon gave him a list of symptoms to watch for that would require him to go to emergency right away. He gave Brian instructions how he could be reached at any time of the day so he can talk with medical staff. So we went on holidays and this meant I became his porter! So when he went to the US for a board meeting and conference, he was very anxious, knowing all these realities, never wanting to have to deal with the added complications of another medical system. In sharing this situation with the board at the meetings there, one asked him how they could support him, and he shared the doctors’ numbers and information with every board member so they could act if something happened. He said that once we were back in Canada, he was relieved and his anxiety level went down.

Throughout this time, he has also been thinking and making comments about if he was paralyzed, what changes would need to be made to the house to make it accessible and how he could continue his work. To this I have often responded, don’t think like that, as my personality is to think positively. However, this shut down important conversation including the possibilities for hope of how life can continue if it did happen. This kind of reflecting, helps us know that whatever happens we will be “fine”, there are resources, and support, and ability to face whatever happens. In this, he is filled with gratitude that we know the situation, that we have lots of resources for whatever outcome may be. We are blessed. He knows he is not going into this alone but supported by community that includes both the people in Regina, friends who have been through this, and friends around the world. We are blessed that we have such a good health care system in Canada, and we are grateful. We also feel blessed by the communities of support we have as we move through this time.

Right now he is on his last day of driving from Ontario by himself which seemed an ok idea at the time we arranged it – I had to be back at the church earlier, and he stayed some extra days to camp with and support his extended family to spread some ashes of his brother in the area where they had a cottage for many years. This driving trip has been a great concern with what we now know about his neck. I know our prayer chain has been praying for him, which is another blessing.

Through reflecting on this experience for this sermon, and talking with Brian about it, I have realized how hard it has been for me to face the fear and the realities with Brian. Sharing this with him, has opened up more understanding and the importance of facing the hard realities and potential challenges along with the optimism. I have to confess that until yesterday, I had not asked Brian for those numbers for the doctor so did not have them as he was driving by himself. In my perspective of hoping for the best, and fear of dealing with the worst, I avoided the potential hard realities and would have been unable to fully offer the support and care needed in case of an emergency. If there was an emergency, I didn’t have the information to call the doctor, which could be life and death for Brian. Sometimes our fear of the worst, or avoidance of it, can be the least supportive to those we love. It is so important to be able to face the good and bad, the hopes and the fears together, fully, in which we experience blessing.

It is our hope that everyone who experiences pain and struggle in their life, can find and draw on the support in their communities to express what they need to. May we be able to offer the support needed to those going through challenges, even when that means facing the pain with them, hearing them and being with them in the harsh and scary possibilities. Then there is real blessing, and God is there.

I am sure you have experiences of blessings in your life and experiences that you could share and I invite you to do so with those around you after the service and as you move through the rest of this day.