

Blessings or Curses

First Congregational Church, Branford

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26

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In Deuteronomy, Moses says to the people:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continues his sermon on the mount with a teaching concerning anger:

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The word of God for the people of God.

(w/megaphone)

Little pig, little pig,

let me come in,

no, not by the hairs on my chinny chin chin.

Then I'll huff and I'll puff

and I'll blow your house down!

Near the end of that story, the wolf came along again and he huffed and he puffed. He puffed and he huffed. And he huffed, huffed, and he puffed, puffed, but he could not blow the house down. At last he was so out of breath that he couldn't puff anymore, but he spun about with rage and swore he would get in.

What we learn about uncontrollable anger is that it's going to get you in a boiling pot of stew! Just like that wolf. Rage can kill you. A large international study recently showed that if you're angry or upset and go out for an intense run or work-out, or move furniture, you *triple your risk of having a heart attack within an hour!* While regular exercise is good for stress, we shouldn't do it when we're angry.

But, anger, in and of itself, is okay. It's one of our emotions. The Bible tells us that God gets angry, and we're made in the image of God. Anger is an important emotion. Can you name 5 things that make us angry?..... here are some others: *when your child disobeys you; when someone betrays you; when your spouse has an affair; when someone steals from you; when someone cuts you off in traffic; when the marginalized in our society are unfairly treated; on and on.* It's not anger that's bad, it's what we do with it that's the problem, right? We learn in the Bible that God decided to have a check on his anger because he understood that he went too far when he wiped everybody out with the flood. He sent the rainbow as a sign that he wouldn't do that again - that he would take a breath and count to 10! I love thinking about God giving himself a time-out, to chill, and to remind himself that he is going to be a God of blessing, not cursing!

Because, when we're really angry we can't see straight. The 12-Step programs teach, STOP, THINK before you ACT. *We* can be in charge of our anger instead of our anger being in charge of us. We all know that once something is said or done in anger, it can't be taken back. Physical or verbal blows cause harm, and there's usually a price to be paid for what we've said or done. And, it's just not good for our heart, and for our longevity - God wants us to live long in the land and prosper. A couple of years ago I read about an elementary school in Baltimore who was sending children who misbehave to a *Mindful Moment Room*. In a room with lamps, decorations, and plush pillows the students are encouraged to use breathing and meditation practices and to *talk through* the incident that got them sent to the room. There were no suspensions at the school that year. See,

I've created a little space right here for us... if you're feeling angry after worship, come right on up, and lay down. :)

The world we live in is so aggressive. People bully to get their way. We should impose time outs. And then *talk through* difference of opinion. As I suggested to the children, if we *get smart* we can argue our position without blowing up. How good would it be to become a culture, and a country, that embraced *civil* discourse? It could begin with each of us in our daily life. I know we always thinking about *those people* who should have civil discourse, but what about you and me. What about when we point one finger and have 3 pointing right back at us?? Civil discourse begins at home, with you and me.

On the flip side, many people deny they're angry. That's no good, either. You stuff it and stuff it until one day you blow. When we *admit* that we're angry, it can lead to healthy change. Anger might tell you you're actually in the wrong job, or a wrong relationship. Or, it can at least lead you to speak up for yourself, instead of just accepting how people are treating you.

In Deuteronomy, God lays out how to live a healthy life. *Its like this*, God says, *there's life and death, blessings and curses - and you get to choose. You have that power.* God says choosing life will fill us with love and peace. We can choose a life of blessing or cursing. Do we spend more time blessing, or cursing and complaining? Complaining, complaining, complaining. A couple of Sundays ago we got to try our hand at blessing. It felt good, right? *Now*, we don't have to bless people who've done us harm, but we don't have to dwell on cursing them - you know, go over and over again what they've done. We can give it to God, and move on - *choose life*. Choose your heart. Sometimes when I dwell on wrong things that happen to me or those I love, I'll stop, and tell myself, *choose life*, and I just let stuff go. But, sometimes I know that anger is telling me that I need to address something. But, when we do that we *have* to address people with a cool head, right??

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus warns of unresolved anger between neighbors and calls for an act of reconciliation. He gives us this picture of a worship service heading toward the climactic presentation of the offering, when suddenly chaos breaks out! We imagine this person and that person begin to move across the sanctuary to be reconciled with estranged fellows! Now, it's unclear whether the brother or sister who has something against the other is justified in being angry or not. Whose right or wrong seems beside the point to Jesus. The issue... is the *disrupted relationship*, and the move toward healing.

People of God, I think that is just tremendous. What a good and important teaching to have in the church. Wherever there's been hard feelings, *before* you go to the altar with your gift to God, it is most important to be right with your neighbor. Because God hears us say in our offering, *we love, honor and worship*

you, O God, while we're holding onto this little grievance for our neighbor two rows over. This seems to be very important to God, maybe even more important than the offering. God wants peace between us. He wants us to be reconciled.

Let's consider if we need to think about anything we might've said or done to a fellow church member - step back and reflect, *am I good with everyone, am I in right relationship with them? What might it take of me to make it right?*

Now, looking at our whole community, everyone seems to agree that FCCB is warm, friendly, inviting, maybe even a place of blessing, but some have wondered if we're as welcoming of children as we could be. Are we really blessing them? Do we struggle with how uncontrollable they are, how rambunctious they are in the pew?! I think our new C.E. Coordinator is going to help open our hearts and minds to children, and their unique ways and gifts; what they have to teach us. Jesus blessed children whenever he could. *He never cursed children.* Going further with blessing over cursing, would we bless the homeless if they came in, an ex-convict, if openly gay people came in, if refugees walked in, if a transgendered person joined us - would we do everything we could to make them welcome - and maybe even go a step further because we know just how important the unwelcomed are to Jesus.

As an experiment in blessing, let's work on that piece - go to extremes to welcome who we might've unwelcomed. And, every Sunday before worship look around for who needs to be blessed, particularly if it's someone with whom we need to be better reconciled.

Leo Buscaglia, known as the Doctor of Love, once wrote: People ask, why isn't the world a better place? But, the right question to ask is, *how can I make it better? How can I make it better?*

With the help of God, we can be someone who blesses, not curses.

But, when *I do need to huff and I puff.... I'll go to the Mindful Moment Room!* Amen.