**July 12, 2015**

**7th Sunday after Pentecost/ Proper 10 (Yr. B)**

**Ephesians 1:3-14**

**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

I invite you to imagine in your mind’s eye, that we are all together this morning, and we find ourselves facing a wide stream in front of us that runs clear and swift and sparkling. At first it looks like it might be easy to wade in and cross the stream, but once we’re in it, it sweeps us off our feet by its sheer flowing power. So, we are going to have to look for stepping stones in order to make our way across the stream.

We HAVE entered into a powerful flowing stream this morning. Today’s Epistle reading which opens the letter to the Ephesians is a stream of praise to God for who God is, what God has done and is doing. This is the language of worship and poetry. In the lesson we heard, the passage consists of 11 verses, but in the original Greek it is ONE LONG SENTENCE! It goes on and on with so many images, promises, and challenges, that we barely know how to enter into the text. The writer of this letter starts by stacking superlative on top of superlative, weighted phrase upon weighted phrase. But we need a place to launch from, a stepping stone to get us started, if we are to understand any of it. We could choose any one of a number of words from the passage that would lead us on a path across this stream of praise, words like “chosen”, “grace”, “forgiveness”, “redemption”, “adoption”, “inheritance”. In every instance, God is the initiator of what occurs, and we are the recipients of God’s action.

So, let’s begin at the beginning. The stepping stone from which we will start to make our way across this stream of praise is mentioned 3 times in verse 3: “***BLESSED*** BE THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST…WHO HAS ***BLESSED*** US IN CHRIST…WITH EVERY SPIRITUAL ***BLESSING***.” We’re about to set our feet firmly on that stepping stone of ***BLESSING***.

Just what do we mean when we talk about “blessing”? At its most basic level, blessing means “to receive God’s favor”. Well, we bless all manner of important and pretty ordinary things in our lives - back packs, our homes, our pets and other living creatures. And as a church, we bless marriages and lifelong, committed relationships. But what is it we’re doing when we offer someone a “blessing”?

In Latin, the word is *“benedicere”* – *dicio* means “speak” and *bene* means “well”. So blessing means saying good things of someone, speaking well of a person. Forever and always God is the one who initiates any blessing. From the very beginning, God has been determined to bless humankind. It started with creation, moved through covenant relationship with the people of Israel, intensified dramatically in Jesus’ incarnation – his life, death and resurrection, and now comes to us in the Sacraments we celebrate in Baptism and the Eucharist. God has always been intent on blessing us, lavishly pouring out Divine goodness and favor.

Now who of us does not need to hear good things spoken to us, and said of us? Not flattery, but genuine truth. Our ears are so keenly attuned to pick up the negatives we hear daily, both in our own minds, and from sources outside us - mantras of rejection, failure, shame, guilt, grumbling, complaining, fear, and despair. So I appreciate how Roman Catholic priest and spiritual author Henri Nouwen reflects on blessing. He says: “To give a blessing is to affirm, to say “yes” to a person’s Belovedness. And more than that: to give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks. A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness, their true self.”

Nouwen shares a personal story that happened to him in the group home for physically and mentally challenged people where he was working as a priest. One of the residents, Janet, asked Henri for a blessing. He sort of perfunctorily made the sign of the cross on Janet’s forehead. She protested vehemently and said, “No that doesn’t work. I want a real blessing.” He didn’t know exactly what she wanted, but he told her he would give her a real blessing when they met for prayer service in her home later that day. So when about 30 of them were sitting in a circle on the floor for their prayer service, Henri started out by saying that Janet had asked him for a special blessing, because she needed that right now. He still didn’t know what Janet wanted, but she didn’t leave him in doubt for long. As soon as Henri told the group Janet had asked for a special blessing, she stood up and walked toward him. He was wearing an alb with big, roomy sleeves. She put her arms around Henri and rested her head against his chest. Nouwen says: “Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost disappeared in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, “Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s Beloved daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”

Janet raised her head and looked at Henri. Her broad smile showed him that she had really heard and received the blessing. When Janet returned to her place, another resident Jane, and then gradually another resident, and another – many of the physically and mentally challenged people living there - expressed that same desire to be blessed.

Nouwen says: “We need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by Divine love on every step of our lives.” *(story from Life of the Beloved, by Henri Nouwen).*

God in Christ has said an emphatic “Yes” to our Belovedness, our preciousness to God. God in Christ has shown us that love WILL guide us every step of our lives. That’s what this Ephesians passage of praise is about. And while it does apply to us individually, the letter is written to a community of believers. This suggests to me that as a community of faith then, we are called to become a ***community of blessing, in order to bless others.***

So – how might a ***community of blessing*** look to someone from the outside? What about a community of blessing would make people curious, make them sit up and take notice – because they see that something is really DIFFERENT here? You may want to come up with your own list of what describes a ***community of blessing***. I’ve settled on 4 markers that I think characterize such a community, a community that is unafraid to boldly wade into that stream of praise to God, because it is convinced of the absolute dependability of God’s love shown to us in Christ, and continually fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

* The first marker of a community of blessing that I would notice is JOY. Joy in worship. Joy in fellowship and friendship. Joy in learning and serving and growing together. The joy of children who are welcomed and present and share their wonder, simplicity, spirituality, spontaneity, and creativity. Joy in welcoming newcomers. JOY. Joy that bubbles to the surface and overflows because the community is habitually giving thanks for all that God has done, and is now doing in its midst, and in the world.
* The second marker of a community of blessing I would notice is COMPASSION. Compassion can be tough work, mostly because it means we have to pay attention and notice what is happening in the world, and to those around us. Compassion is about walking alongside those who are lonely, lost, and hurting, not in order to “fix” them or necessarily take away their pain, but just to be with them, wherever they find themselves, to help them know they do not walk alone. Compassion requires the willingness to rub up against the pain in others’ lives, and with Christ, to be there, steady, in the midst of it.
* The third marker of a community of blessing that does make me sit up and take notice is HEALING, FORGIVENESS, AND RECONCILIATION. This is about trusting in God’s ability and desire to transform and bring new life to all people, and to the world. It is about taking seriously the notion that “God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us”. God desires abundant life for us. God desires for us freedom from the things that bind us, that block us from health and wholeness and deepening spiritual maturity. God desires fruitfulness from our discipleship that leads to healing and reconciliation in all our relationships, including restoration in the created world and our environment.
* The fourth marker of a community of blessing that I would pay attention to is GENEROSITY. This is the desire to share God’s love, to freely and lavishly give love away. This is not just about giving money. It is about giving our time, our skills and abilities, our prayers, our willingness to invest and reach out and get to know those who may not look or act like us, with no expectation of getting something from them in return. This is “no strings attached” giving, simply for the sake of love.

I think a community of blessing would look suspiciously like God’s kingdom coming. I think being part of a community of blessing would be about experiencing eternal life - right here and right now.

So, how willing are you – are we - to step out, to get our feet wet by wading into that powerful stream of God’s love? Are you, am I, willing to step into that healing stream and be taken to the heart of God’s love, the source of all blessing? Are we ready to be swept along and be lost in wonder, love, and praise, like that writer of the letter to the Ephesians did?

Ah, my friends, let’s take a risk. Let’s be courageous and reach out our foot to grip and stand on that stepping stone of blessing. It’s possible we might just fall into that stream of God’s grace and eternal love, but would that be so bad, really?

I don’t think so! Blessed are we! Blessed to be a blessing. Always – and forever. Amen.