



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## "Blessed to be a Blessing"

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock am service, January 24, 2016*

*The Third Sunday After the Epiphany—Based on I Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21*

What is your answer to the questions:

Whose opinion is most important in your life? Whose affirmation do you most need? Who is it that you would most like to say to you, "Well done, you're a valuable person"? From whom do you most seek a blessing?

Psychologists and therapists tell us that many people grew up in households where authority figures had the chance to extend honoring and blessing, but it never came. Many people did not receive a word of affirmation from a key figure in their life ... a parent, a coach, a teacher, a mentor, a professor, a sibling, an employer, a peer. And as a result, many people have spent their lives trying to win the approval of someone or something.

So, I ask again: Whose approval do you most seek? From whom do you most want a blessing?

At the radical center of the Christian gospel is the reality that we are playing to an audience of One. We don't finally exist to win the approval of a parent, an employer or a peer. In the end, the only opinion that matters is that of God in Christ ... and, so, what is that opinion?

..... God loves each of us unconditionally! God's final evaluation is to claim us as God's children, and embrace us as part of divine community.

In our Gospel text for today—Luke 4:18f—Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown community of faith. He opens the scroll of Isaiah and reads:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

Jesus sat down, taking the posture of the homilist, and declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If only we would listen to his voice instead of all the other voices of influence ringing in our ears. If only we would live for his opinion and blessing, instead of trying so hard to live up to some other standard or to receive someone else's nod of approval.

I bought a boat once. I was much younger then, and I didn't know any better. I was influenced by my friends in the church and by the incredible allure of the water. I spent way too high a percentage of my income for that boat, but I thought it would be life-giving, therefore worth the expense. I was wrong!

Every time I had a day off, or even a few hours free, I would go out my side door and look toward the driveway and that boat would speak to me. It would say things like:

"You paid too much for me ... You and others are doing without so you can have me. Therefore, it is your responsibility to use me whenever you have spare time. Now, go get your automobile, hook my trailer up to it, and let's go have fun, fun, fun."

I didn't possess the boat; the boat possessed me.

Who or what do you listen to ... From what or from whom do you most seek a blessing?

On a much more serious level, my high school friend, Dean Grove, was hounded and probed and challenged and critiqued daily by a brutal and demanding father. He was told on a regular basis that he didn't add up ... he wasn't

cutting the mustard ... he wasn't towing the freight. On a regular basis Dean was told by a disapproving dad that he wasn't lovable unless he performed according to fatherly standards. In short, Dean never received a blessing.

Well, then it happened—tragedy struck! Toward the end of our senior year in high school, after Dean once again didn't "make the grade" either in the classroom or on the athletic field, and had been drilled by his father one last time, Dean drove his motorcycle to the other end of their considerable estate, pulled out a pistol and ended his life on earth.

Billy Joel sings about "No Man's Land" where everyone is looking for a blessing but everyone is alienated and disconnected. He sings of contemporary America's prayer in these words: "Give us this day our daily disconnect." The teenagers he sees in Times Square he describes in these words: "I see these children with their boredom and their vacant stares, God help us all if we're to blame for their unanswered prayers... For daily we encourage 'take all you can for yourself,' when we know all along that giving to others is the substance of life."

What Dean Grove sought in the face of a demeaning father, and I sought in the special boat, and the world continually promises us in every advertisement, can be found in quite another way, in another place, with another person. The world promises life and delivers death; Jesus promises death and delivers life!

Is there a sign that stamps real our blessing from God? Is there a vivid expression that tells others that we have been blessed to be a blessing?

According to the Gospel, the answer to these questions is neither vague nor ambiguous. Our relationship with God is real, authentic and has the ring of truth when the spirit of the Lord is upon us ... and when people are hungry for good news and we proclaim it; when they are captives and we set them free; when they are blind and we enable them to see; when they are oppressed and we help them find liberation.

There is a very curious line in the 15th Chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus says: "Love one another as I have loved you." It would have been much more sensible if Jesus had said, "Love me as I have loved you." That would be good human logic. But the heart of Christ's message is not always logical, at least according to our standards. According to his way of thinking, love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.

Through the analogy of the body in chapter 12 of I Corinthians, Paul says that Jesus is the Head and we are the members. You can't say: "Well, I love the eyes, but I don't love the fingers. I love the mouth, but I don't like the feet. In Jesus' mind, all the parts have an important function. In terms of the community, then, all of the people have significance. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable!

In the winter of 1947, the Abbot Pierre, who was known as the modern apostle of mercy to the poor of Paris, found a young family on the streets one night—homeless and almost frozen to death. He gathered them up and brought them back to the monastery, which was already filled to capacity with other poor people. He looked around and there was no place to put them. So the Abbot went to the chapel and promptly removed the reserved sacraments from the altar and tables and placed them in an upstairs cold, unheated ambulatory, and installed this young family in the chapel. When his Dominican brethren expressed shock at such irreverence, the Abbot Pierre replied, "Jesus Christ is not cold in bread and wine, but he is cold in the body of a little child."

This is why our community ministries are so desperately important. For the homeless, the poor, those coming out of prison, the refugees, the hungry—we are providing twice a day the only life-giving experience some of them know. And let's not diminish also the blessings extended through our children, youth and family ministries, our pastoral care, and healing ministries. And the life and inspiration extended by our music and liturgy, by this holy space and landmark buildings, and by the radical welcome and hospitality each and every day.

Each of us is here because somebody—a family member, a teacher, a priest, a coach—cared enough to be a blessing. Well, there are more of God's children out there — and in here — seeking out a blessing ... the blessing of love and mercy and grace.

Shortly we will stretch forth our hands around the altar to receive Christ's presence. We will receive the Christ in order that we may be the Christ to others, to be blessed to be a blessing.

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