

As you look around the church walls this morning you can see artifacts of the year and a half when we were doing the edited video version of our Sunday service. As you surely remember I videotaped myself down in front on my iPhone which I set up on a tripod. And at the end of the service I didn't want to have my head down in a book reading God's blessing. I wanted to look at the camera and offer a different blessing each week so that we would hear a new fresh promise of God to each of us. I accomplished that with the very low-tech idea of piece of newsprint taped to an easel. This way I could save them and use them again at another time.

Christine probably has a lot of artifacts left over from her very intense weeks and weeks of putting the service together with music portions, zoom files of readers, my video and many, many hours spent in editing the whole thing for posting so that we could share worship from our own homes. It was an intense and very long time that Christine dutifully spent all those hours. The congregation is very thankful to you, Christine, for all that time and effort you put in, and the beautiful videos that were produced. You are a blessing to us at Trinity Church.

My reason for posting all these blessings this morning is to remind us all that we are filled with the abundance of God's blessings. Those who stick around until the end of a service on a Sunday morning, or any day, are reminded, just before we hear the postlude and go out the door, that everything we have and everything we do is a blessing.

Jesus, in Mark's Gospel chastises the disciples for shutting down a person who wants to offer God's healing (a blessing) in the name of Jesus. Why would we object to that? Well, for thousands of years Christians *have* objected to just that. The split of the Christian Church in the year 1000 into the Roman and Orthodox sects was an instance when arguing about who has the right understanding, and who prays correctly argued just like these disciples are arguing.

When the Roman Church split into two factions in around the year 1500, again, Christians were fighting with each other about who was worshipping correctly and saying the right things. There were other issues at hand too, I'm oversimplifying. But the point here is to question who lost out when experts are fighting about faith? It's the people who just wanted to pray to God and receive God's mercy and pity (as our collect this morning says): God's blessing.

In all situations in which Christians fight with each other about who is doing things properly, it's the people of Christ who lose out. Never mind who wins the fight between the factions! We all lose, because we lose faith in the leaders of the church, and we may lose our trust in God who wants for us health and salvation. God blesses us and never wishes us harm.

Jesus uses the shocking exaggeration about cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye. I mentioned this last week in connection with the Passion predictions of Jesus. What Jesus is railing about in this passage is people who put a barrier to faith in front of someone. A stumbling block is a barrier. And

to cause someone to stumble is painful and dangerous. As we get older, stumbling can mean the difference between walking safely down the street and having to go to the hospital with a broken bone. Doctors tell their older patients like me, “Stay upright. Keep exercising so you don’t stumble and fall.” Arguing about who should be allowed to pray for someone, or who has the right and wrong belief is a barrier that might cause our faith to stumble.

Jesus says to the disciples who want to stop a man from praying in the name of Jesus, “Do not stop him for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

You, each of you. deliver God’s blessing to many people you encounter in your daily rounds – whether at work, or in the community or with your family. And you may not even recognize that you are doing it.

And then we all come back here week by week to be refreshed as we join together and receive the bread of life. We meet Jesus once again here and become ready to go back out once again to offer healing, strength and blessing to those we meet. And when we just listen with empathetic ears to what someone is saying we are being a blessing to them. We don’t need to fix the problem to be a blessing.

Esther, in our Old Testament reading this morning, was a blessing to her people. And she didn’t do it in an overtly religious way. There’s very little talk of God in this short book. But she stuck her neck out, and spoke to the king on behalf of her people. And her bravery may have saved thousands and thousands of people. Three years ago, you may remember, we took a deep dive into Esther and studied the Book for four Sundays. Today’s reading is the only one we’ll hear this year from the Book of Esther. So, if you weren’t here three years ago, take a little time and open the Bible and read this dramatic short story of a young woman who was a blessing to Jewish people in Persia.

Giving a cup of water. That’s all it takes. No grand gestures are needed to be a blessing to someone.

Receiving a cup of water. That’s all it takes to accept a blessing **from** someone. And then know that you are truly blessed.

Jesus does not want us to maim ourselves when we make a mistake or say something we wish we had not. Jesus wants us to follow him, listen to others as he listens, treat others as he treats them, and always be ready to bless and be blessed.