

# “Blessed”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
Thanksgiving Sunday  
13 October 2019

UNEDITED COPY

## Sermon – “Blessings”

“Have a blessed day!”

In parts of the American South, and I suspect elsewhere,  
such have become the words of farewell  
from the bank teller to the barista,  
to the person bagging your groceries.

Usually spoken from someone  
from an evangelical Christian background,  
the words are often offered up with a friendly wave goodbye.

“Have a blessed day!”

I’ll confess that this blithe little blessing rubs me the wrong way.

It causes me to bristle.

And in my less-than-gracious moments,  
I’ll confess that I’ve even felt a bit of resentment upon hearing it.

In part because it feels so superficial, so insincere.

I mean, it’s said to anyone and everyone.

It’s just so glib.

It feels, to borrow a phrase  
from some younger folks in my life, extra.  
It's over the top.

And it feels, if I can say this as a minister, a little preachy.  
A bit judgy.  
Somehow a little holier than thou.

“Have a blessed day.”  
Indeed.

I've been wondering why being wished a blessed day—  
in contrast, say, to a simple “good day”—seems to bother me so?

The shallow and preachy sentiment is surely part of it.  
But there's something more.

And that something more stems from the feeling  
that a blessing, let alone a blessed day,  
is something that feels so far out of my control.

Blessings, after all, as traditionally understood,  
come from someone or some place else.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow” goes the old hymn.

There's a sense of a person having a blessed day  
as having gained divine favour somehow.

When people wish one another a “blessed day,”  
there's an expectation that God gets the credit

for any good things that might happen.

And, yet for me, theologically and otherwise,  
the world feels a lot more complicated than that.

Good and bad things happen to everyone.  
And certainly some contend with more bad than they can bear—  
or may in any way be fair.

The rain falls alike upon the just and the unjust.

And, yet, agnostic as I am,  
I encounter blessings around me every day—  
when I am attentive and awake to the world around me,  
when I'm not taking everything for granted,  
and when, quite frankly, I've had an attitude adjustment  
that helps me to appreciate the unfolding of life around me,  
no matter what it brings.

A Buddhist friend of mine posted a quote on Facebook recently  
that I have been sitting with.

It reads:

“If you choose not to find joy in the snow,  
you will have less joy in your life  
but still the same amount of snow.”

That speaks to the kind of attitude adjustment I mentioned a  
moment ago.

A way of confronting what is—

what is real, what is before us, what is happening—  
while also holding open the possibility  
that it may contain within it a form of blessing,  
if we're willing and able to embrace it.

I don't mean to suggest a lemonade theology,  
in which the goal is always to make from life's lemons  
the best that we can.

Don't get me wrong, this is a wonderful ability to have.  
There is wisdom in having such a spiritual practice—  
of being able to take a problem and transform it into a possibility.

But the key to being able to do this is altering our attitude,  
that we might be fully open to what is.

*The late, great poet Jane Kenyon captured this  
in the most mundane but poignant of ways in her poem,  
"Otherwise".*

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.

It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.

All morning I did  
the work I love.

At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.

But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

I believe what Jane Kenyon describes here  
was a truly blessed day—  
a day in which she was awake to being alive.

Attentive to the milk and the peach.  
To a nap and the candlesticks.  
To strong legs and a walk with the dog.

She, for at least that day,  
held a deep-seated awareness of life's gifts

poured out across the mundane moments of all her days.

The ordinary that is actually quite extraordinary.

The basic stuff of life that is the basis of all of our blessings.

This Thanksgiving, this is my hope for you.

That you might have a truly blessed day, this and every day.

Not because the gods have shown you favour,

but because you are awake to your life,

knowing that it presents to you gifts beyond measure.

My colleague Barbara Pescan writes:

High above us the sun shines  
and beyond the sun  
the stars of night  
hide in the daytime sky.

Below our feet  
the worms  
out of their bodies remake the earth  
And at the centre  
the earth still simmers  
with its first fire.

Somewhere  
between the stars and the earth's core  
we live  
and weep  
and ask  
and laugh

and answer.

Such wonders abounding  
how can we not be amazed?  
Let the light and darkness  
bless each other  
and bless us

Friends, here, between the stars and the earth's core—  
where we live, and weep, and ask, and laugh, and answer—  
may we count the blessings of our lives,  
that we may know ourselves blessed.

Amen.