

Blessing—God’s Last Hope, and Ours

On our knees, with arms heaved heavenward, we receive and give away the abundance that flows from God’s grieving, broken heart.

ILS closing plenary session, 18 April 2012
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Thank you for the privilege of joining you and yet another remarkable group of Institute speakers, preachers, and musicians. I have gratefully received along with you the gift and blessing of their learning, their wisdom, their gentleness, and their faith.

We have seen again, as we always do here, that our words and our worship are filled to overflowing with meaning and with power we can scarcely fathom, much less stop to measure or account for as we employ and inhabit them day to day. But when we do stop, as we have this week, to ponder a matter such as “blessing,” we find ourselves at a feast, in a place full of treasure. Gordon [Lathrop] and Chris [Scharen] and Martha [Stortz] have fed us, taught us, and gifted us, as have many others in worship and breakout sessions (even Dave Brubeck—who knew?), and now it’s time to gather up the baskets at the close of the meal we have shared, so when we head out later into the far country where each of us finds our vocation, we have enough to sustain us.

Years ago I learned from Walt Bouman, a frequent presenter at this Institute, that at any point this late in the proceedings, a speaker needs to open with humor. However, levity in the “blessing” category isn’t all that abundant. There are a few things, like this “Irish Blessing” that surely many of you have heard:

*May those that love us, love us.
And those that don't love us,
May God turn their hearts.
And if He doesn't turn their hearts,
May He turn their ankles
So we will know them by their limping.*

A rabbi friend once share with me an inside joke that was going around his circles . . . about a newly prosperous young fellow who goes to his Orthodox rabbi and asks the rabbi to say a *birakah*, a blessing, over his brand-new XKE. “What’s an XKE,” asks the rabbi? “A Jaguar,” the young man explained, “a very fine and expensive automobile.” Upon hearing this answer, the rabbi declared in a dismissive tone that he had no *birakah* for a thing like that. He advised the young man to go see the Conservative rabbi. The fellow does so, and the same conversation occurs. “What’s an XKE?” asks the rabbi, and he, too, says he has no *birakah* for such things. So the man finds a Reform rabbi, explains his recent good fortune and prosperity, and asks if the rabbi can say a *birakah* over his XKE. The Reform rabbi listens carefully and asks, “What’s a *birakah*?”

In a somewhat different sense, this has been our question in these days. “What’s a *birakah*?” Gordon got us started with that very question yesterday morning, and by the time he completed his post-plenary workshop over in the breakout room, he confessed that the longer he’d thought about this topic of blessing, the more he’d come to think it’s about almost *everything*, at least everything that we do.

After scouring the scriptures to prepare for this talk, and listening to other speakers here, I feel a little like Pontius Pilate, who had a very complex conversation with Jesus one morning long ago about politics and power and truth, and at the end he asked a question left hanging for readers and preachers to ponder ever after. “What is truth?”

Some folks take that as a grand, philosophical question, but in that scene, it’s the question of a befuddled fellow who no longer knows what the conversation is about. Jesus has switched subjects on him three times in three interchanges and Pilate is lost. But if there were an answer, at least in John’s gospel, the answer would be one Pilate could never understand. The truth stood right in front of Pilate. “I am the truth,” Jesus had said a few chapters earlier.

After all I’ve pondered about blessing in these past weeks, I think that if there were ever to be another edition or redaction of John’s gospel, Jesus should add one more “I am” statement. He should say, “I am the *birakah*.” Then again, maybe it’s there, and we simply haven’t seen it clearly.

What’s a *birakah*? What is blessing? It’s a deliberate act that makes space, Ben Stewart told us so winsomely on Monday night, a space in which we stop short, so as not to be mere consumers, but receivers, thankful recipients of holy gifts.

Gordon taught us that in sharing blessed bread and blessed wine, we get taken up in the story of God and Israel, and when we bless the God we know in the crucified Christ who gives himself in bread and cup we become reoriented, no longer conformed to this world. We become a people whose habits subvert the patterns humankind works so hard to maintain, the ones that find us using blessing to keep power and to pass it on as we wish. (And of course it’s not just some bad guys out there somewhere whose patterns we subvert, but it’s our own, for we *simul justus et peccator* folk are just as adept at Father Isaac’s patriarchal way of blessing and the Pharisee’s perverse, self-flattering blessing as anyone else—until, that is, we get crucified, finally, by our own words.) And so, when we ask God’s blessing on ourselves, or on our worship spaces, organs, homes, boats, XKEs, and even our dogs, we ask God, the Father of the crucified one, to use all these in the service of that one’s holy mission.

In some ways it’s all very simple, and in some ways very complex, but whatever it is, this work, this mystery, this treasure we’ve tried to get hold of this week, it begins with *knees*. And with kneeling. That’s the first meaning of the oldest canonical language we have for naming or describing “blessing.” בָּרַךְ (*barak*) is the Hebrew verb, and בָּרֻךְ (*baruk*) the more familiar passive participle. Each comes from בִּרְכָה, (*berek*) the word for “knee.”

You can hear the image or metaphor in the word for blessing being played with just a bit in that lesson we heard yesterday in our noontime prayer.

⁵⁴ Now when Solomon finished offering all this prayer and this plea to the LORD, he arose from facing the altar of the LORD, where he had knelt (עַל-בִּרְכָיו) with hands outstretched toward heaven; ⁵⁵ he stood and blessed (וַיְבָרֵךְ) all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice: ⁵⁶ "Blessed be the LORD (יְהוָה: בָּרֻךְ), who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised; not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke through his servant Moses. (1 Kings 8:54-56)

It’s about kneeling, but when we translate בָּרַךְ and בָּרֻךְ into the language of us gentiles, we end up with forms of εὐλογέω, eulogy, in Greek, and in Latin, *benediction*, and thus the image changes completely to kinds of speech—speaking good, speaking well, praising, granting

approval. For what it's worth, our English word "bless" comes through Middle English, *blessen*, which in turn comes from Old English, *blētsian*, *blēdsian*, which meant "to consecrate," originally with blood. Cf the earlier **blōdisōian* (*blōd* blood + *-isō-* derivational suffix + *-ian* v. suffix).

But in our biblical story, it begins with knees. Being on one's knees, to be exact, in the posture of receiving a gift, or whatever else the one who stands above the kneeler intends to bestow. The kneeler has no choice. He or she cannot run away. The gift, a title and a kingdom, or a blow, or even a sword, will come down upon one's head. We've been carrying a picture of blessing around all week on the front of our worship booklet (Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*).

As we've been reminded several times this week, the story of blessing as we now have it begins with God blessing the animals in Genesis 1, bidding them to fill up the earth with life, and then God blesses the human beings, giving them the same charge, and finally God blesses the seventh day, the one on which God rested. And before you know it, we hear not only God blessing creatures and time and the work of human hands, but people and all the rest of creation blessing God. And mostly it all sounds like a whole lot of eulogy and benediction—saying "good," and making nice talk, even if sometimes we have to force ourselves to speak it.

But we must not forget the kneeling. We kneel before God to receive all that God gives. But strangely, we also bless God, which apparently means that God also kneels to receive what we give, even when our blessings are mixed, even though our blessings are *always* mixed. . .mingled as they are with our sins and maledictions.

The curious reciprocity of blessing appears in the very first story of human worship. We don't know what words Cain used along with his sacrifices, but something, perhaps, like, *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam, boreh p'ri ha-gafen*. "Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler eternal, who creates the fruit of the vine." But so far as Cain could tell, God did not kneel to receive his blessing, but disregarded it, so Cain saw to it that God ultimately received the rest of what dwelled in Cain's heart, too—anger, and a craving for justice.

Yes, the canonical story starts with blessing. But soon, very soon, it devolves into the opposite, into a story of cursing. God responds with curse when humankind insists upon having more than merely God's gifts and blessing. Give us 39 trees from which to eat, and we will insist on stealing from the forbidden 40th. Give us the gift of six days on which to work at our trade and one on which to sit back and rejoice, and we will rise up from our knees to seize the holy seventh, the day of rest, and find some way make it ordinary, too. Shine your face of blessing a little more brightly on my brother or sister than on me, and I will trump your injustice, God. I can't kill you, but I can make you pay. Bloodshed leads to more cursing, and soon the earth is filled with it.

I cannot depict the scene that cries out for some end to all the cursing any better than does the brilliant homiletical musing of the narrator near the end of Marilynne Robinson's earliest novel, *Housekeeping*, a story of two young girls who live under a curse, after their mother drowns herself in a lake, the same lake that had once swallowed up a whole passenger train full of surprised, unsuspecting people, including the girls' grandfather, when a railroad bridge had inexplicably failed.

If there were to be a scripture lesson for the Sunday of the 100th Anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, this would be it. These paragraphs are part of my personal canon, and they fit well in this context because Robinson sees so well how the most remarkable gifts God gives us are the very ones we twist and turn against God.

Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job's children, and a voice was induced or provoked into speaking from a whirlwind; and Rachel mourned for her children; and King David for Absalom. The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory—there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.

Cain killed Abel, and the blood cried out from the ground—a story so sad that even God took notice of it. Maybe it was not the sadness of the story, since worse things have happened every minute since that day, but its novelty that He found striking. In the newness of the world God was a young man, and grew indignant over the slightest things. In the newness of the world God had perhaps not Himself realized the ramifications of certain of His laws, for example, that shock will spend itself in waves; that our images will mimic every gesture, and that shattered they will multiply and mimic every gesture ten, a hundred, or a thousand times. Cain, the image of God, gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow, and God Himself heard the voice, and grieved for the sorrow, so Cain was a creator, in the image of his Creator. God troubled the waters where He saw His face, and Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generations, and all of them transients, and wherever they went everyone remembered that there had been a second creation, that the earth ran with blood and sang with sorrow. And let God purge this wicked sadness away with a flood, and let the waters recede to pools and ponds and ditches, and let everyone of them mirror heaven. Still, they taste a bit of blood and hair. One cannot cup one's hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it, lifting their children toward the air, though they must have known as they did that soon enough the deluge would take all the children, too, even if their arms could have held them up. Presumably only incapacity made infants and the very old seem relatively harmless. Well, all that was purged away, and nothing is left of it after so many years but a certain pungency and savor in the water, and in the breath of creeks and lakes, which, however sad and wild, are clearly human.

I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight. There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken. Curse and expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make songs out of all these sorrows and sit in the porches and sing them on mild evenings. Every sorrow suggests a thousand songs, and every song recalls a thousand sorrows, and so they are infinite in number, and all the same.

Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes.¹

At that point, Robinson's homily begins to tell how God got pulled into the waters when Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus. We'll reach that point later. But in the Bible itself, already back there by the receding stench of the flood waters, God has something of a conversion experience,

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (Picador, 2004), pp. 192-194.

and gets pulled into the vortex, as it were. When the flood is over in Genesis 8, and God surveys the damage after the water has receded into pools, God has to admit that it did not work. The flood had failed. It didn't change anything. Even after all the purging, humankind is still the same, their imaginations bent on remaking the world in their own image. So God promises never again to try fixing the mess with curse. God hangs up God's multicolor warrior's bow and says, "No more. You can count on it, people."

And then, when the whole, tragic cycle starts over, with nakedness in the vineyard and curses getting tossed about once more, and finally the wickedly comical splattering of proud, monolingual and monomaniacal humankind over the face of the earth in language and culture groups who cannot begin to understand one another, God tries something new. Out of the blue, we read. . .

. . . the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. (*Genesis 12:1-4*)

Blessing instead of curse. This is the new thing. This is God's last hope for the world. Or if we put that in Hebrew, the single thread by which the creation hangs. (תִּקְוָה, *tikvah*, the word for hope, means "thread.") Abram and Sarai, agents of blessing, are God's last hope for the world. If blessing does not work . . . Well, it simply must. The alternative is unthinkable. God would lose or have to give up everything. Blessing leaks, Martha [Stortz] promised us. And from this one blessed couple, one bit of dye cast into the specter of more flood waters, God hoped for lots of leaking.

From this point on, God and the seed of Abraham and Sarah are stuck with each other, joined at the hip by the stubbornness of blessing, so to speak. Countless times God will remind Israel that the people are nothing without God. And just as often spokespersons among the people of Israel, like Moses, will say the same to God. "What will the neighbors say if you dump us, God? That you brought us out here just to kill us? That you're just like all the other gods of the world—quick-tempered, vindictive and hard-hearted? Think about it, God. Your good name will be ruined." And so often, God repents, and all is saved, including God's reputation. Indeed, God even boasts of this. "I am the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. I even repent of the evil I sometimes threaten!"

Blessing instead of curse. But then, what **is** a *birakah*? What can it mean to bring blessing, or to be a blessing, to all the families of the earth? What does blessing look like? Oh, in some of the stories that follow in Genesis the presence of Abraham and Sarah seems to bring others wealth, and young Joseph, one of our guys, becomes the parade example of how a single, young Israelite can bring to a whole people the blessings that come from wise planning.

Later on, Jews would say that Torah is the blessing with which they have gifted the world, and Christians would cite the Messiah, son of David and Joseph and Mary.

But the salutary story of blessing, of God and humankind kneeling before each other, weaves through the ancient story in other, still helpful ways. I find this story of blessing told partly in the names of those who, one generation after another, bore the blessing of being God's last hope for the world.

Abram and Sarai got their names changed to Abraham and Sarah, and they waited to become a great nation. God seemed in no great hurry. These two old parent-wannabe geezers both laughed at the promise that their sorry, old flesh would prove fruitful. Then, when Sarah finally did give birth after all the heartache and cruelty of the Hagar and Ishmael debacle, she named her child יִצְחָק (*yitzhok*), for her laughter. But not, as we might suspect, for all the laughter that led up to this birth, the laughter of cynicism and disbelief, laughter *at* the impossibility of blessing. Abraham named the child, but Sarah tells its meaning: “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (Gen. 21:6)

This laughter is different, not laughter *at* something or someone else we deride. It is laughter *with*, and there’s a huge difference between the laughter of derision and cynicism and that of surprise and shared celebration. If this is laughter at anything, it is laughter at oneself, at one’s disbelieving self. This is the laughter of those who can laugh at themselves for being wrong, and at the surprise treasure we receive when we turn out to be wrong. That is blessing, the gift of being able to give up our need to be right—the greatest desire we have, I often say nowadays—and to laugh at ourselves. In that laughter, we can receive the new gift, the one we thought could never come.

There is laughter of this kind in the theology of the cross, at least in the way Luke paints it for us. Have you listened closely to Luke’s scene in which the two crucified guys plan their future? “Hey you, with that king sign above your head,” says one. “How’s about making me your right hand guy when you come into your kingdom?” The other nailed and dying fellow says, “Sure, friend, you and me. Let’s do it. Today. This is it!” Imagine the soldiers recounting this later, telling of those crucified guys making plans, as if there’s any point. One can’t help laughing. It’s all a grand, holy joke...and we’re the ones who get to laugh.

As an added bonus, this blessing makes us taunt-resistant and blasphemy-proof. Folks make fun of our holy things? We don’t respond in kind. We’re already crucified. What do they think they can do, hurt us?

Back to the story. In the next generation, Isaac and Rebekah received the blessing of twins, Esau and Jacob, the second of whom was born trying to be first, and that became the story of his life. Indeed, his name, יַעֲקֹב (*ya’kov*), means “he’ll get the best of you.” And in one way or another Jacob did that with everyone, regardless of what it took or which bridges needed burning. When he finally headed back home from exile for that fateful meeting with the brother he had cheated so long before, he sent the family ahead and stayed behind to . . . to what, prepare a speech?

His quiet was interrupted, as we know, by the coming of the night stranger who wrestled Jacob until daybreak and then asked to be let go. Jacob said, “Not until you bless me.” (Jacob gave away nothing for free.) The stranger blessed him—with a knee in the groin and a ruined hip joint that left him limping for the rest of his days. And also with a new name—Israel. The one who wrestles God.

Next day, knowing now that his real battle in life is with God, not his brother, Jacob met his brother in peace, and he told Esau, “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” (33:10) The reciprocal nature of this blessing is more mysterious than I can account for. It leaves us scratching our heads. (If we fight God instead of our siblings, we see God’s blessing face in the face of our sibling?) Whatever it means, we can’t help but wish . . . if only Cain could have had a

night of blessing like Jacob's, and fought God instead of landing all his enmity on his little brother.

Among other lonely figures who receive and know this blessing is Job, who loses everything he has except for, just barely, his breath, and his flummoxed wife, and he says, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Then he curses the day he was born, and between derisive retorts aimed at his friends who are drunk on theodicy, he gets in God's face for 30 chapters of really prickly poetry. At the end God says, "Well, it seems to me that Job is the only character here worth listening to." Ah, the stubbornness of blessing.

I wonder, after listening to Chris Scharen and Martha Stortz if this, perhaps, is where we place the conversation about marriage, whether of gay or straight, whether ill-advised or perfectly matched by eHarmony. When two people come to us and say, "We want to become one flesh. We want to tangle up, all into one ball, our arms and legs and our finances and careers, our genitalia and our tongues and the saliva of our kisses, our vulnerabilities and our prickly parts, our life-long habit of imagining what this one life we get might have looked like someone else's arms, our arrogance and our gentleness, not to mention our respective families and prospective in-laws, what do we do? If we can't talk them out of it, we send them to the courthouse where God's left-handed servants make it legal, mostly so there will be enough lawyers to clean up after it all ends. And it will end, either in divorce or probate court. Then, when finished at the courthouse, we gather to bless them as children of God, Martha reminded us, and as God's beloved, said Chris. And in blessing them, we promise to cling to them in the name of the God of Israel. Kneeling, we will receive both the blessing and the wreckage of their union, and we'll get both whether they stay together or not. We will all receive the blessing that two can be, more fully and richly than one be alone, but we will also bear the burden of their sins and afflictions. We will limp from kicks in the groin. But together we will see God in each other's faces.

When you wrestle all night, and no one lets go, and the reward is to walk away limping, what have you gained? What have you received? Blessing. The blessing of kneeling before the one who never lets go, and being received into the arms, the care and eternal, all-keeping memory of the one who hangs onto us when we have no more strength to grip, nor any thread to cling to, the one into whose arms you land when you cry out in bitter lamentation, "My God, my God, why . . . ?"

Once again, back to the story. Jacob, now become Israel, would pass along blessing to his seed, too, and once more, in the God of Israel's subversive pattern, it fell to a younger son—fourth in line. The story of his name reveals more richness of blessing. Jacob had two wives, we recall, and Genesis tells us that when God saw that Rachel was loved and Leah was not, God opened Leah's womb, but Rachel remained barren. Soon enough, Leah, the wife Jacob never meant to take, bore him four sons.

Her husband slept with her, and even while his hands were on her body he dreamed of Rachel, and Leah knew it. She craved Jacob's love, and she was sure in her heart that bearing sons would earn her that love. So, she named the first child she gave that man Reuben. "He has seen!" And the second Simeon. "He has heard!" The third time is charmed, we have known practically forever, so the third boy she named Levi. "Entwined forever, we now are." Each time, she knew Jacob must now love her. But Jacob did not love her.

Finally, when she bore a fourth son, she gave nary a thought to Jacob. Bowed to the earth, bent over in the posture of birthing and laid low by the failure of her body's fruits to satisfy her

husband and gain his love, she throws up her hands in thanks and offers her child to God, not to her husband. This one God will receive, and give away, over and over. She named this child Judah, from the word that means “to throw up one’s hands.” יהודה (yehuda), Judah, is a form of the verb for heaving one’s hands heavenward, in the act, perhaps, of giving it all back. What a perfect gesture for a woman in frustrated surrender! She had lost. She’d learned, among other things, that you can’t earn love and your children aren’t your own, nor is anything else. Children, life, love—they’re all gifts. And that means they’re for giving away, starting with handing them back to God . . . in thanksgiving. “Judah” means, “O, give thanks!”

Still today we use that gesture when we give thanks, especially as priests in the act of blessing, and in thanksgiving handing back to God the gifts God has given us. . . bread and wine, the rest of the offering for the day, our very selves, the whole of our beloved community, including all those members who have gone before us and whom we hand back to God in thanks when we gather to count up what blessings we have received for having them as fellow-pilgrims on our own journey through space and time.

Along with holy laughter and finding ourselves tightly held in the Gracious and Merciful Wrestler’s grip, this is blessing for all the families of the earth, this gift of thanksgiving, of receiving everything in life not as our right or as the proof of our worth, but as gift.

And from the line of this people, God’s agents of blessing, God’s last hope for the world, and more narrowly from the line of Judah, comes our Lord Jesus Christ, who, on the night when he was betrayed (by a namesake of Judah, ironically enough), took bread. And when he had . . . what? Mark and Matthew say he “blessed” it. Luke and Paul (in 1 Cor. 11) say he “gave thanks.” Perhaps this means these terms were synonyms by the time of the writing of the gospels, although it may be significant that in the messianic banquet scenes out in the wilderness of Judean territory, where Jesus feeds the 5,000, not counting the women and children, Jesus blessed (εὐλόγησεν) the bread, broke it, and gave it away, but in the later feeding of the 4,000 (not counting women and children) up in Gentile territory, after that woman who would settle for crumbs had knelt before Jesus and got hold of his heart and made him think about throwing bread to dogs, he gave thanks (εὐχαριστήσας), and broke the bread, and gave it.

In any case, he broke it and gave it, even to all us gentiles. And as we know, partly with the evangelist John’s help, it wasn’t only wheat and the fruit of the vine he gave away out there on those days, but himself. Near the close of the other banquet scene that both Mark and Matthew connect directly with this story, John the Baptist had knelt before the soldiers in Herod’s prison, and then John became dessert, a tasty morsel of revenge, at Herod’s macabre birthday party just before this wilderness banquet at which Jesus, too, becomes food in the messianic feast he sets before the crowds. If you eat this food, you have his life in you.

Then once more, on the night of betrayal, he blesses the bread. He kneels before the Father who gives all things and he receives the bread of brokenness and cup of death, of his own sacrifice, that others might be fed.

With arms held up in thanks, he hands himself back to God, and soon, in mocking cruelty, the soldiers pinned those uplifted arms in that position, forever as it turns out, but at least for that moment until he was dead, spent, and neither wrestling nor laughing any more.

He was sucked into the vortex of the flood waters, drowned along with all our sisters and brothers who have ever lived, whose blood cries from the ground and whose hair and flesh we

can still smell at the edge of every lake and stream. The stop at Lazarus' tomb was only a moment's delay on the way to that drowning. Plunged into the terrible flood, he descended, and to all the generations that have drowned in God's great grieving, he preached, says the First Letter of Peter (3:18-20). I assume he preached the way he has ever since that dark, good Friday. He held up his wounds, and said, "It's over. Follow me."

And then, as we have celebrated once more in these days, the grand surprise. I must tell you, when I wrote all this, I thought we would be in the Chapel during this hour, like we were last year. So, I expected that great *Christus Rex* above the altar would serve as my Power Point, with its arms uplifted in the gesture of victory, which is also the gesture of *yada*, thanksgiving, he rises above the shadow of cross and grave.

I have studied that *Christus Rex* more times than I can count, and I readily admit that after all these years maybe I see in it what I want to see. But I swear to you, if you sit in the pews on the north side of the Chapel of the Resurrection, and you look at that figure, you can see that the head tilts ever so slightly to the right as the figure peers toward heaven—or is it toward us? Is this the king who has judged the world giving one last nod to the sheep on the right, to whom he says, "Come, you blessed of my Father; receive your inheritance," but then also, by that same gesture, looking away from the goats at the left?

No, I think not, for as I just confessed, he has just now come from preaching to that congregation, the assembly of the damned. So it must be something else. I take it for the universal gesture of surprise. "Would you look at this!" that slight tilt of the head suggests. "Death does not get the last word. We were wrong! *Yitzhok!*" The surprise of blessing plays ever so gently on his face.

Jesus did not say, "I am the *birakah*," but perhaps he didn't need to. In the gospel of John's Greek, he is not *εὐλογία* (*eulogia*). He is *λογος* (*logos*), pure and simple. Without him, nothing was made, for nothing was worth making. Without *adam* and the Son of *adam*, the Son of Man, there would be no one to kneel and receive it. He is Word Made Flesh, for it is in him, in his living and in his dying, that God receives the world, and in him, in his living, dying, and rising, that the world receives God.

And now, in John's elaborate multi-valence, we are in him, and he is in us, and in him, we are all together in God. Which leaves us where, exactly, in space and time? When you kneel before a bunch of folks with dirty feet and give them the blessing of care, of cleanness, of community, when you lift up thankful hands and give away all the bread and breath you have, you get whatever God, who once grieved over giving a world away and getting bloody cries of anguish in return, chooses to give to those who live in the blessing of thankfulness. God gives new life, although it never looks like what we thought it would. It's always a surprise. That is our secret, maybe the greatest, secret of blessing—it's always a surprise, to both the "blesser" and "blessee." You never know quite what you'll get when you kneel and can't run away, whether you are God, or one of us.

All our rites of blessing give us joy and unity and gladness and healing. They also put us to the test. Faithfulness to our words of blessing pins us in kneeling-places where we are sure to be crucified, sometimes for our own sins, sometimes for others' sins, but nailed for certain. We do indeed, as our English word suggests, make things holy at the cost of blood. But always, and forever, we are crucified with Christ.

And so, on our knees, with our hands held up, and heads tipped in surprise slightly to the right, we bless each other, we bless the bread, the cup, the marriages of all those crazy enough to try lifelong commitment and faithful, one-flesh mud-wrestling, and we bless the faithful departed, in whose train we follow, and whose heads even now are tipped in a vision of surprise we can only imagine.

And we bless God, who kneels and welcomes us home.