

Blessing

Theological Dimensions of Human Sexuality

The Rev. W. Raemond Fletcher

What is it that we do when we bless something? Are there constraints on what we can bless? What is there in common among blessing altar cloths, animals, chocolate eggs, battleships and marriages? In all the voluminous discussion of blessing same sex unions, there has been much attention given to the unions, but very little to *blessing*. This paper is an attempt to begin to fill that gap.

Section I sets out two different understandings of blessing, which I call the *salutational* concept and the *sacralizing* concept. Very briefly, the salutational concept (lying in the Hebrew word *barakh* and the Greek *eulogein*) is one of recognizing, greeting, honouring, thanking, and well-wishing; this is the conception of blessing that is found extensively in the scriptures. The sacralizing concept – which comes into currency in about the 10th century – is the idea of setting apart, removing from the realm of the profane, making sacred.

Section II argues that the debate that is now raging in the Anglican Communion has been skewed by limiting itself to the sacralizing concept of blessing and failing to incorporate the salutational one. In particular, it suggests that while the blessing of such things as linens, fonts and bells nicely falls within the province of sacralizing blessing, the blessing of marriages does not.

Finally, section III argues that the church has always understood that blessing (in its salutational sense) can be bestowed even on things that belong to the fallenness of creation: wheelchairs, battleships, hospitals etc. It follows that even those who think that homosexuality is not part of God's intentions for the world, but a product of the fall, should not balk at the salutational blessing of same sex unions: at welcoming them, at wishing them well, at undertaking to sustain them.

Section I – Two Understandings of Blessing

The concept of “blessing” has taken on various meanings throughout church history. Specifically, it has been seen as an act that

- a) Recognizes holiness and wishes to celebrate that holiness in blessing God.
- b) Seeks God's favour or protection for what is being blessed
- c) Wishes good for that which is blessed
- d) Seeks to set something apart from the world as holy
- e) Seeks to guard and protect it from evil.

Of these, the first three embody what I am calling the *salutational* concept of blessing and the last two exemplify what I am calling *sacralizing* blessing. After filling out these concepts I will say why, when talking about blessing relationships, we should understand the salutational concept rather than the sacralizing one.

SALUTATIONAL BLESSING

The concept of *salutational* “blessing” has its foundation in the Hebrew “*barakh*” meaning “to kneel”. It conveys the meaning of respect or adoration. In the context of the relationship between humanity and God, it brings us before God in adoration, praise, thanksgiving and supplication. God has initiated this relationship by blessing us with the gifts of life, creation, spiritual gifts, community and companionship, in and through which we find fulfillment and completion. We bless God, in the understanding of “*barakh*” in “rendering to God those things that are God’s” (*He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*-*Luke 20:25*).

The prime example of blessing in the Old Testament is the ‘Aaronic Blessing’. “The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift us his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” The blessing, seeks God’s favour or protection and wishes good for that which is blessed. Other examples of salutational blessing are found in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As Joseph finds his family safe in Egypt he blesses Pharaoh for the goodness that he has shown (*Genesis 47:7*) and is himself blessed by Jacob who has seen God’s hand at work in his son (*Genesis 49:24-26*). Seeing that God had blessed Naomi, the other women bless her by offering “praise” (i.e bending the knee) to God and include in the offering of praise a statement of the way in which God had worked in her by providing her with kinsmen. (*Ruth 4:14*)

Examples of such a blessing in the New Testament can be found in Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary on the occasion of what we now call “The Visitation”, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” (*Luke 1:42*) and in Simeon’s blessing upon Mary and Joseph in the temple. (*Luke 2:34-35*).

In the *Septuagint* the Hebrew *barakh* was rendered into the Greek “*eulogein*”; which is regularly translated into English as “to bless”. In fact scholars report that this word appears very seldom in Greek classical writing and in fact the concept finds its origins in the Hebrew. A more direct translation therefore would be “to speak well of: to praise; to call down God’s gracious power.” in line with the Aaronic Blessing. In seeking to bring God’s blessing upon something, say a relationship, the individual and the community of faith do just that: they speak well of God, praising God for who God is and what God has done, and call down God’s gracious power into the life of the couple and through them, the community. The community speaks well of God as God is seen in those whom the church seeks to bless, and in so doing speaks well of the individuals and their relationship.

In this context, the question with which the church is faced is whether a relationship between those of the same sex can bless (*praise*) God by rendering their lives to God through seeking to live faithfully before God and with one another in the context of self-giving love. If such a relationship can bless God, then the church is called to greet or ‘salute’ God in that relationship by speaking well of what God has done in it and by calling down God’s gracious power upon it – indeed those who do this themselves obtain a blessing.¹ The blessing is reciprocal, blessing both the couple, and reflexively the community that does the blessing. (*see also Num 24:9, Gen 12:3*)

¹ “Blesses are merciful for they shall obtain mercy”

Put differently, *salutational* blessing recognizes that God has come to dwell with the couple, so that the church can fulfill its calling to announce and protect that presence among God's people. It speaks about the immanence of God in the members of the community and about their most sacred relationships. From this point of view, "We bless people *not* to increase their spiritual dignity but to give thanks for the role they have been called to play within the reign of God and thus to release them to play their part in that reign."²

Now the principles for "blessing relationships" just outlined would be applicable to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. This means that the question to be asked before blessing any couple is whether the church discerns God's presence in the relevant persons as individuals and in their relationship. Of course there is a problem if one part of the church discerns an awareness of God's presence, while another does not. But I suspect that much of the difference in this case would be accounted for by the fact that not everybody is working with the same conception of blessing.

SACRALIZING BLESSING

In the latter part of the first millennium the Church begins to take on an authoritarian role and within two centuries after the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 C.E. it had become a form of theocracy. By the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216) the model of "church" was that of institution. The Roman Church in 993 C.E. began to officially canonize Saints. As the millennium approached fear of the last judgment increased. By the 10th century the general shape of the baptismal liturgy was in place which contained strong responses to the presence or threat of demons at work in the world. The reforms begun by the Benedictines at Cluny in an attempt to move away from the secular and into a more spiritual life added to the mix and by the end of the 10th century C.E. the sense of blessing as recognition of God's goodness and our thankfulness was giving way to what I am calling *sacralizing* blessing. According to this later development "... no object can have a cultic use unless it has first been withdrawn from the profane world by a preceding blessing"³

Thus nearly a millennium after the establishment of Christianity a bold shift takes place in our understanding of blessing:

Rather than [...] being an act of thanksgiving for the gifts of God already bestowed upon us in persons and things, a blessing came to be understood as the withdrawal of a person or object from the profane sphere and a re-locating of the recipient of the blessing in an appropriate quadrant of the sacred realm. The Church ceased to celebrate the goodness of the whole creation and began to differentiate between sacred and profane.⁴

The use of blessing, then, seems to have shifted from an act that recognizes God's work to an act that satisfies, ecclesiologically, what is required for general acceptance and membership. Viewed from this perspective, many actions of the community can be taken

² Occasional Celebrations of The Anglican Church of Canada, pg. 119 © 1992 The Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre

³ Pierre Journel, "Blessings" in Aime Georges Martimort, ed, The Church at Prayer: In Introduction to Liturgy, vol 3: pg. 272 © 1988

⁴ Text in Context: The Blessing of Same-Gender Covenants in the Diocese of New Westminster, The Rev. Dr. Richard G. Leggett, Professor of Liturgical Studies, Vancouver School of Theology.

as “blessings”. Baptism itself is a blessing, as it claims a person for God and sets them apart from the profane world into God’s realm. The emphasis in western liturgies on the pre-baptismal exorcisms underlines this view. More generally, reception into the Church (usually a denominational activity) can be seen as a form of blessing, since a person is received *into* a specific expression of the community of faith, *away from* the world around them.

In both situations, the person has been set apart from what is deemed *profane* to receive access to various channels of grace and other blessings that come with church membership. That is, in being set apart from the world by one rite, the person gains access to those other rites which seek to bless life in its completeness.

So why would those holding this conception of blessing be more prone to hold back on the blessing of same-sex unions? Well many clearly think that homo-sex in all of its contexts is profane, which means either that (1) same-sex relationships cannot be blessed or (2) if they are to be blessed, it must be in virtue of something other than their sexuality – that is, in virtue of factors that do not support their sexual love, expression or desire for one another. Now I will challenge this kind of reasoning in my final section, though, first, I should say why salutational blessing seems a richer concept of blessing on the whole.

Section II – The difference our concept of Blessing makes

It seems apparent that the current discussion about same-sex unions typically presupposes the sacralizing concept of blessing: it focuses on whether same-sex relationships can be set apart from the world as holy.

To be sure, there is a grievous avoidance – even if not always mindful – on the part of many to consider the issue of salutational blessing, which, again, means asking whether we ought to celebrate, seek God’s favour for, and protect same-sex relationships. This is unfortunate since the salutational concept of blessing seems to be the richer of the two: it has a solid foundation in scripture; it takes into account the experiences of the relevant persons; and in focusing on the fruit of the spirit – as opposed to what is sacred or profane – seems a lot less legalistic.

So how do we determine whether a same-sex relationship should receive salutational blessing? As mentioned earlier, that would involve exploring, most importantly, whether the gifts of the Spirit – which are a sign of God’s presence and blessing – are apparent in a particular relationship. In the positive case that couple is a good candidate for salutational blessing (and the same principle would apply to heterosexual couples). Indeed, the decision to hold back such a blessing (or the refusal to sincerely investigate the matter in the first place) would constitute a serious error on the part of the church and a potential offense toward God. Thus if there are same-sex relationships that display the relevant fruit – as I suspect there are – Christ’s overarching commandment to love one another should compel us to seek God’s favour and protection for these couples: to wish them well and to seek their protection from harm.

One further point: since the church already recognizes ‘God’s presence and God’s grace in homosexual persons,’⁵ it seems strange that she wouldn’t take more seriously the possibility that the committed and faithful relationships in which they engage couldn’t

⁵ Lambeth 1:10-C

also display that same presence and grace. My own suspicion is that what ultimately holds back many is the idea that homosexuality is a fallen condition. And that leads me to my final section.

Section III – Can We Bless Fallen Things?

Whether or not we decide to bless same-sex relationships will likely have a direct influence on the future of Anglicanism. Many, I think, suspect that if homosexuality is a fallen (and in some sense unnatural) condition, then it simply cannot be a blessed one. I want to challenge that kind of reasoning.

My first argument is that we already bless things that we take to be part of the fallenness of the world: we bless battleships, hospitals, and dead animals – by which I mean meat! These are signs of that which is ‘unnatural’ depicting things that are out of line with God’s *original* intentions for creation – they are signs of death, disease, sickness and war. But being in a fallen world, as we are, we find ourselves often blessing fallen things because of the benefit that comes to us from doing so. Of course, we would rather that there was no need for hospitals and wars (or that we did not desire to eat meat), but the world is not like that, and until things change, we will likely go on blessing these things because battleships keep people alive, hospitals are places of healing and meat nourishes our bodies.

Now this need not imply that just anything can be blessed. Unlike meat, war and hospitals, some things may have no redeeming qualities and provide no benefit to the community. But same-sex relationships – and this is my second argument for why they should be blessed – have many redeeming qualities, including the potential to benefit the community; they promote love, goodness, kindness and faithfulness – and all the more if we were talking about same-sex marriages whose stability in relationship, commitment and faithfulness would be a benefit to the individuals, the couple and the community.

While much more could be said, these above considerations suggest to me a couple of things. First, when talking about relationships, we should prefer a *salutational* concept of blessing over a sacralizing one. Second, no matter what concept of blessing we decide to go with, the main intuition for saying that same-sex unions should not be blessed seems confused: good things can come from blessing fallen things, so that even if we were to think (which I do not) that homosexual relationships are, to put it bluntly, fallen relationships, this does not imply that they cannot be blessed relationships as well.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by summarizing the case I have been arguing. The concept of blessing is a surprisingly confused one, and, given that we are involved in such a debate about blessing relationships, it is odd that no one has given much attention to sorting out the different strands in this concept.

I argue that there are two main conceptual poles around which the idea of blessing revolves. The first is what I have called *saluational* blessing. Its essence is wishing well to a person or a situation – recognizing that it is a formal act of well-wishing. So Jacob blesses Joseph, etc. This is the earliest conception, it is biblical, and it derives from the Hebrew word *barakh*, to bend the knee.

A second concept, which I have called the *sacralizing* blessing is of much more recent date: it appears, according to Pierre Jounel, to have come officially into the church only in the 10th century. It is the idea of making something holy, of setting it apart from the profane. This is the blessing of candles, of oils, of baptismal water etc. Part of the sacralizing concept – and this is common to many religious traditions – is that that which we bless must itself be pure and undefiled. Salutational blessing, by contrast, can be given even to those parts or aspects of the world that we regard as part of the fallenness of creation: so we bless hospitals, battleships, and meat!

The question that arises then is what sort of blessing is going on when we bless relationships, marriages? Surely the broad answer is that it is salutational blessing: we are greeting God's presence visible to us in the relationship, wishing the relationship well, and committing ourselves, as a Christian community, to support it. It seems, then, that no matter what one's view of same-sex relationships – are they part of God's plan for the world or are they redeeming exercises in a corner of the plan that has gone awry? – we should be willing to bless them.

The Rev. Rae Fletcher is a graduate of Trent University (Peterborough) and Trinity College (Toronto). He spent twenty-five years in the diocese of Ottawa where he was a member of the Doctrine and Worship Commission before moving to the diocese of Huron in 2005, where he is rector of Bishop Cronyn Memorial Anglican Church, London, Ontario. He has recently become one of the national spokespersons for "The Widening Circle" and is chair of the Planning Board for the Huron-Cronyn Lectures on Faith and Reason.