



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Be a Blessing!

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*A sermon delivered at Covenant Presbyterian Church
in San Francisco, California on 29 January 2017*



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Readings:

Genesis 12:2

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.¹

John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* §360

The only way we can be formed for heaven is through the world. That is the ultimate goal by which every affection must be defined. Unless affection manifests itself or flows into action, which happens in sizeable communities, it is stifled, ultimately to the point that we no longer focus on our neighbor at all, but only on ourselves. We can see from this that the life of thoughtfulness toward our neighbor—behaving fairly and uprightly in all our deeds and in all our responsibilities—leads to heaven, but not a life of piety apart from this active life.²

²Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Trans. George F. Dole. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000. p.205. Print.

“Be a Blessing!”

That’s how Everett Fox’s translation of Genesis 12:2 ends.

“Be a Blessing!”

Not a suggestion, a command. With an exclamation point!

Except for the punctuation, Fox’s translation of the Hebrew is not significantly different from the New Revised Standard Version. Fox’s version is:

“I will make a great nation of you and will give-you-blessing
and will make your name great. (PERIOD)

Be a blessing! (EXCLAMATION POINT)”³

God is sending Abram out from his homeland at age 75. Abram takes his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their possessions, including the animals and the people of their households, on a pilgrimage of faith. The original immigrant pilgrimage story. What trust Abram, and his extended family, must have had to pack everything up and move to an unknown place! I marvel at Abram’s trust and that of his family. And God charged Abram: BE A BLESSING!!

Let’s put some context around our Gospel reading for today which is among the best known passages in the Bible and comes from the Sermon on the Mount. There is a parallel sermon in the Gospel of Luke called the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6: 20-49). One significant difference between the two is that Matthew addressed the Sermon on the Mount to the disciples AND the crowds (Matt. 5:1) whereas Luke’s Sermon on the Plain is addressed solely to the disciples. Both begin with the beatitudes, but Matthew’s sermon has numerous sayings related specifically to Jewish Christians, the intended audience, and is quite a bit longer; Luke’s Gospel was aimed predominantly at Gentile Christians and, since the references were less meaningful to

³Fox, Everett. *In the beginning: a new English rendition of the Book of Genesis*. New York: Schocken , 1983. Print.

that audience, they were not included. By setting the sermon on a mountain Jesus becomes a Moses-like figure; at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus sits down, the position of a teacher or a ruler.

The Beatitudes are beloved in part because they capture the essential lessons Jesus taught us. As the Kurt Vonnegut passage in the bulletin puts it:⁴

“'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”

Since mid-November, I've been meditating on peacemaking; particularly on engaged “living room conversations” as a method of peacemaking. In particular, the article “Why I Left White Nationalism” in the *New York Times Magazine* by R. Derek Black shortly after the election caught my attention. Black, the son of the founder of Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website, is also the godson of David Duke, former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Black grew up in West Palm Beach near Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate and “was once considered the bright future of the movement.” After community college, Black decided to study medieval history at one of the most liberal colleges around: New College in Sarasota, Florida; which happens to be my alma mater and where I met my husband! Black attributes his change in attitude toward white nationalism to the “many talks with devoted and diverse people ... who chose to invite (him) into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize (him).” In particular, Black cites the impact of being invited to and attending a weekly Sabbath dinner given by a fellow student, the only Jewish student on campus. Black notes in his *New York Times* article that, since his renouncing of white nationalism:⁵

⁴ The quote in the bulletin for the service is: “For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!” Kurt Vonnegut, “A Man Without a Country,” *The Guardian* (20 January 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/21/kurtvonnegut> (accessed 28 January 2017)

⁵ Sources of this story were accessed on 28 January 2017:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d5>

People have approached me looking for a way to change the minds of Trump voters, but I can't offer any magic technique. That kind of persuasion happens in person-to-person interactions and it requires a lot of honest listening on both sides. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn't understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved. Let me emphasize that last part: "... I couldn't understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved."

My first action after the election was to join the Tri-Cities Interfaith Council (Fremont – Union City – Newark, California). On Saturday, January 21st, I marched with Sr. Annette, a nun of 60 years and a contingent of young women from Notre Dame de Namur University (NDMU) in Belmont, California. Sr. Annette and I had traveled to Oakland with one of the speakers, the Chair of the Tri-Cities Interfaith Council a Muslim woman named Moina Shaiq who wears a hijab and is very active in the Fremont area. Fremont is a community where over 150 languages and dialects are spoken. In addition to many Christian churches,⁶ it has a Jewish temple, a Hindu temple, a Sikh gurdwara, a Thai Buddhist temple, an Islamic Center. Fremont is home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the Bay Area; the ending of Khaled Hosseini's 2003 book *The Kite Runner* is set in Fremont's Central Park. Sr. Annette, Moina Shaiq and I rode together on a packed Bay Area Rapid Transition (BART) train from Fremont to Lake Merritt station, then Sr. Annette and I spent some time chatting with people as we waited to link up with the NDMU contingent; together we made our way to the Civic Center just in time to hear our friend Moina speak. I was very grateful that the march was peaceful, that the Oakland police were very much in the background, it sprinkled but didn't rain and there were enough porta-potties, still with toilet paper and seat covers, at the end of the march! WOW!

[0061aa9fae_story.html](#)

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3846448/How-son-infamous-white-supremacist-groomed-leadership-turne-d-movement-thanks-Orthodox-Jewish-friend-college.html>

⁶ Present day Fremont is the site of one of the original California missions, Mission San Jose. The original mission building has been rebuilt in the original style and today serves as a site for devotion, weddings and tourism. There remains an active congregation at the adjacent St. Joseph's Church.

Before I decided to march, I had to decide what I was marching for. My actions needed to be connected with my reason AND my heart. Yes, I was marching to support my friend, Moina. Yes, I was marching side-by-side with Sr. Annette. And also, I was marching because I remember the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, Watergate. I was marching because I believe deeply that "all persons are created equal" and are here on earth living their lives "to form themselves for heaven through their life in this world"⁷ and, by doing so, serve God's great purpose. And, yet ... marching is NOT enough.

We are children of God ... and we are called to be peacemakers for we are charged to BE A BLESSING! When things appear upside down, Jesus turns everything right-side up: we are to be a blessing, we are to bring peace. WOW again! That's an awesome charge, and an awesome responsibility. Rather too much for me, I'd rather stay home and watch TV ... wouldn't you?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who was executed in Germany shortly before Hitler died, made a distinction between cheap grace and costly grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.⁸

"... **cheap grace** is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

By contrast,

"... **costly grace** confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'"

⁷ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* No. 360. Passages in Swedenborg's theological works are numbered consistently in all translations. Swedenborg wrote in Latin, *Heaven and Hell* was first published in 1758

⁸ Quotes taken from Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Discipleship (accessed on 27 January 2017). Bonhoeffer's grandmother was Swedenborgian and he was familiar with Emanuel Swedenborg's theological works. Information on Bonhoeffer is available at: <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/> (accessed 30 January 2017)

So Vonnegut’s comparison of the beatitudes to the ten commandments makes sense in a deep way: as believers, as those who follow Jesus, we are asked to become as the disciples were, to live our lives in accordance with Jesus’ teachings because those are our deep, internal beliefs. We must turn this beatitude around and ask: how we are to be peacemakers, oh Lord, in a world turned upside down? How can we see and honor and respect the Divine spark in those who differ from us? Those who are doing what they think is right and defending their loved ones, just as we are doing.

This weekend marks the beginning of the Year of the Rooster, the lunar new year began on January 28th. There are two other important “days” this past week. January 27th is International Holocaust Remembrance Day⁹ designated by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005 to commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and to honor the victims and survivors of the holocaust. In 2010, California designated January 30th as Fred Korematsu Day¹⁰ which is the first day named for an Asian – American in U.S. history. Fred Korematsu challenged the federal government’s right to incarcerate U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry. In *Korematsu vs. the United States*, the Supreme Court of the U.S. ruled against him in 1944, stating that “incarceration was justified due to military necessity.” That conviction was overturned on November 10, 1983 after evidence surfaced that government intelligence agencies had hidden evidence during the original case; these documents indicated that the Japanese had committed no crimes justifying mass incarceration. Fred Korematsu Day is, at present, observed in perpetuity only in California, Virginia and Florida.

We are living in dangerous times. Perhaps we can take comfort from Jesus’ words:
"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are the

⁹ <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008232>

¹⁰ <http://www.korematsuinstitute.org/fredkorematsuday/>

children of God, for they shall be called peacemakers. I take heart from a kid in a stroller accompanying the Oakland marchers. Munching thoughtfully on popcorn in the tray in front of him and ignoring the big sign on his stroller: “peacemaker in training.” As we move into a moment of reflective silent prayer, you may want to think about how you are called to be a peacemaker. It seems a large task, and it is. I find comfort in Margaret Mead’s words: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.”¹¹

BE a Blessing!

This sermon was presented at Covenant Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, California on 29 January 2017. As an introduction to the sermon, I pointed out that January 27th is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 28th was the Lunar New Year 2017 and January 30th is Fred Korematsu Day. More information may be found at references cited.¹²

¹¹ <http://www.interculturalstudies.org/faq.html>

¹² Information on these events may be found on these websites (accessed 30 January 2017) International Holocaust Remembrance Day <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-trump-holocaust-statement-20170127-story.html>;
Lunar New Year 2017 <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/28/world/gallery/lunar-new-year-2017-the-year-of-the-rooster/>;
Fred Korematsu Day <http://www.korematsuinstitute.org/fredkorematuesday/>

