

## "Our Blessing of Truth"

In Norman Rockwell's illustration, *Saying Grace*, grandma and grandson are in a local restaurant bowing their heads in prayer. At the table with them are two spellbound young men. Like those who are all ears when E.F. Hutton speaks, they are leaning forward in an effort to over-hear the grace sayers. Their gaze is fixed on the reverent praying lips in hopes of learning the words of blessing. To whom are they grateful? What are they thankful for? Are they asking for the waitress to hurry up and bring their food? In the upper left hand corner of the illustration there is a middle aged gentleman. He is standing with hat in hand looking down at the reverently observant but non-praying young men. His facial expression is a commentary on faith in American culture.

*Saying Grace* was voted by *Saturday Evening Post* readers as their favorite Rockwell illustration because it portrayed the American principle of freedom of religion and the human principle of freedom of choice. *Saying Grace* illustrated how main street Americans feel gratitude for our abundance and freedom from want. It captured our human ability for awe and reverence. It pictured how we appropriately take time out to say "thank you" for gifts received. It spoke volumes about our ambivalence about giving a blessing.

In our American culture the most common public blessing we give without hesitation is, "God bless you" when we sneeze. On special national holidays we also sing, "God Bless America." As a clergy person I am invited to pronounce more blessings. I pray formal blessings during worship, in homes, at bedsides, for sports team . . . I bless animals, plants, and boats. I have to admit that my first blessing outside of worship confounded me. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what I was suppose to be praying about. In the chapter, *Practice of Pronouncing Blessings* from her latest book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor explains what first timers

can do to learn. *Start with anything you like. Even a stick lying on the ground will do. The first thing to do is to pay attention to it. Did you make the stick? No, you did not. The stick has its own story. If you have the time to figure out what kind of tree it came from, that would be a start to showing the stick some respect. It is only "a stick" in the same way that you are "a human," after all. There is more to both of you than that. Is it on the ground because it is old or because it suffered mishap? Has it been lying there for a long time or did it just land? Is it fat enough for you to see its growth rings? If you look at the stick long enough, you are bound to begin making it a character in your own story. It will begin to remind you of someone you know, or a piece of furniture you once saw in a craft co-op. There is nothing wrong with these associations, except that they take you away from the stick and back to yourself. To pronounce a blessing on something, it is important to see it as it is (p. 194-195).* It is necessary to keep your mind fixed on discovering what is real, true, and sacred in the other. When you find yourself saying, "It is what it is" you are ready to make a blessing.

**Bless you, stick, for being you.**

**Blessed are you, o stick, for turning dirt and sun into wood.  
Blessed are you, Lord God, for using this stick to stop me in my tracks.**

Blessing words unearth meaning, purpose, and value in earthly things. They evoke awe and reverence for the Presence of the Holy in the ordinary.

In the Hebrew tradition, a blessing prayer is a **brakha**. *Observant Jews say about 100 blessings a day. There are prayers to be said upon waking up in the morning, before setting out on a journey, at seeing a comet, and when wearing new clothes. There are prayers for pastries, fruit, vegetables, and wine (Brown, An Altar in the World, p. 198).* Every blessing prayer for the ordinary stuff of our lives starts out with: *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe.* Blessings are also pronounced on the extraordinary. *Upon receiving good news, an observant Jew says,*

*"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who are good and beneficent." Upon receiving bad news, the brakha is "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, the Judge of Truth."*

In the gospel story for today we find Jesus in one of those out of the ordinary, bad situations. He has been hauled before Pilate for questioning about the matter of kingship. In her commentary on this text, Michaela Bruzzese noted: *Traditional kingship, characterized by absolute power, material riches, and exploitation of the weak, has nothing to do with the Jesus in the gospels; it's a concept Jesus himself shunned (John 6:15). Traditional kings demand allegiance and servitude, but the Jesus of the Bible is about liberation--from suffering, sickness and even death, exclusion, persecution, and our own egos and selfishness. This is who serves the least of these, and who finally gives his body and blood so that others may live (Sojourners, Christ the King, p. 57). "So you are a king? Pilate asked him. In reply to the king whom Jesus knew could end his life with a slight nod of the head, Jesus answered with his truth and with no fear, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Bruzzese commented further: Christ as king is fundamental to our discipleship. With this Christ there is no room for the worship of false gods; by definition, there is no one or nothing else more deserving of our praise, attention, or energy (p. 57).*

**Bless you, Jesus, for speaking your truth to power.**

Jesus had no fear. Christian evangelist Charles Swindoll wrote: *The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past . . . we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the*

*one string we have, and that is our attitude . . . I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90 % how I react to it. And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our attitudes" (internet quote).*

Jesus had an attitude of fearlessness. What has his attitude of no fear got to do with God? The scriptures teach us that love casts out all fear, that love comes from God, that we are beloved children of God, that God will protect, save, and redeem us, that the Lord God says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega" the one who is and who was and who is to come again, the Almighty. . . . that the Almighty will gift us with life without end.

**Bless you, Jesus, for speaking your truth to power.  
Bless you, Jesus, Heaven's King, for disarming our fear of  
every force that threatens to destroy us.**

"What is, is." Jesus looked Pilate straight in the eye and spoke the truth about the non-violent, self-giving, sacrificial dynamic power of God's love. My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here (John 18:36). *This good news, commented social justice writer Bruzzese, compels us, feeds us, directs us, and fulfills us. As (the gospel writer) Mark has shown us the past few weeks, Christ's kingship is fundamentally at odds with traditional structures of power. . . . As heirs to Jesus' kingdom, we are commissioned to bring the good news to this world daily, in acts large and small, public and private. We are ambassadors of the new reign, privileged to share the mercy, love, peace, and justice of Christ with the world (p.57).*

**Bless you, Jesus, for speaking your truth to power.  
Bless you, Jesus, Heaven's King, for disarming our fear of  
every force that threatens to destroy us.  
Bless you, Christ our King, who graces us with peace without  
end as we follow you. Amen.**