

Becoming a Blessing

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

We talked last week about receiving our blessings, about becoming deeply aware of the many ways that our lives are full of them—from the little moments of delight we experience to the deep satisfaction of knowing that the work we have done is good. As the Psalmist says in today’s reading, we need to see that our God is good, happy are those who take refuge in our God, and the blessings God provides.

The next section of Remen’s book is about becoming a blessing. As I watched the Covid cases increase and saw our church struggle to decide how to adapt to the health department’s recommendations, I wondered if some of us might be wondering how to become a blessing in a time of turmoil and anxiety. After all, many of us probably felt like life was returning to normal. We probably weren’t thinking that vaccinated people could transmit the virus to children and the otherwise vulnerable, or that there might be break-through infections of Covid, especially among the elderly. So this news might have come as a shock. How do we become a blessing when we’re filled with worry, disappointment, and sadness?

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I found one answer to this question in the message from one of Remen's stories, where she reminds us that we need to make space to grieve. I know you have heard that from me before, but it's worth reminding us now. In the midst of the rush to figure out how our children will be schooled in the fall, whether we will attend worship in person or not, whether we will attend our planned social gatherings or not, make a space in your day to grieve.

In Remen's stories, she tells us that an organization makes little hearts out of super soft material—like velvet—and gives them to children who have lost someone. They are encouraged to carry the heart in their pockets, then to take it out, hold it and rub it when they are sad. This gives them the emotional outlet that they need and the permission to grieve. And once they have that outlet, they start to have space for other things in their lives. When that organization found out that Remen's medical staff had trouble grieving because of the constant stream of severe illness and death that they witnessed, they made all of the staff little hearts as well. The story helps us understand how some people became blessings for those children and medical staff. But it also helps us understand how having that outlet for grief helped the staff become better doctors—blessings to others.

Tying this lesson to our New Testament story can be instructive. In it, Paul recommends to the Ephesians that they go ahead and be angry, but that they not sin. In other words, it's also

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okay to be angry right now—angry at Covid, at the situation we all are in. Again, we need to feel whatever we're feeling in order to make room for other things, other emotions, other thoughts. So perhaps it's also useful to make a time and a space to express your anger constructively and, as Paul suggests, without hurting anyone else. Let it out through screaming, crying, hitting a pillow, exercise, or through building something that needs to be hammered. Pray it out to God in a really loud voice. But consider putting a time limit on your expression of anger, so that you don't live in it. Your hearts might be full right now and they need to be relieved.

Paul and Remen then offer us further good advice: Once we have made a space in our hearts by expressing our grief, anxiety, frustration, and anger, we can become a blessing by becoming more of who we are—the beloved child of God that each of us already is. And we do this by embracing loving-kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness and service. Truly, one of the best ways to get through difficult times is to become a blessing to others in some way. The folks who make those little hearts for children and doctors are deeply and profoundly aware of the loss that so many people face. And they cope with that loss by helping others cope with that loss. I wonder how we could take our knowledge of the world's griefs and fears, and use it to be a blessing to others?

When I attended virtual Synod a few weeks ago, I had the privilege to hear Dr. Joy DeGruy speak. She is an expert on trauma

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and the author of many books. She came to us, weary of the pandemic, weary of griefs and anxieties, weary of the fight for racial justice, and aware that many of us were also deeply weary of the same things. Yet out of that weariness, she was able to share a story of hope with us that became a blessing for me.

Some years ago, her nephew had started working for the Department of the Interior and he invited her to a tour of the Statue of Liberty. As a professor and black rights activist, she had done quite a bit of research on the statue and didn't want to go on this trip because she knew it would make her angry. You see, she knew that that statue had a different history than what is normally taught on that tour. The original designer and sculptor was a French man and an abolitionist. His original design had the statue holding a broken chain in her left hand, to symbolize the freedom of the slaves. But the people who commissioned it, wanted to brush past that part of our country's history and put something else in her left hand instead. Since the sculptor wouldn't let them have the statue without the chains, they allowed them to be placed at the statue's feet—a part of the statue I bet most of us have never seen.

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Dr. DeGruy knew this and knew that this information wasn't taught on the tours. She also knew that going on a tour would just make her angry. But her nephew convinced her to go to support him in his new career.

Once she got there, she decided that she probably wouldn't say anything because she didn't want to get her nephew in trouble or cause a scene. And yet, standing there in the group, she couldn't quite help it when the tour guide asked, 'do you have any questions'—she had to ask it, "are you going to say anything about the chains?"

After not getting an answer, she and her nephew went into the museum, looking for evidence of the original intent of the sculptor. They found the original drawing, with the chains in the statue's

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hand, framed and hung on the wall—in the basement, behind a bunch of other memorabilia. The truth was hidden, as she said, in plain sight.

Dr. DeGruy went home feeling angry and frustrated. She figured that she should just let it all go. After all, what could one black woman do in the face of over a hundred years of suppressed knowledge? But my interpretation of what happened next is that that little internal seed of God, that still small voice spurred her on to, as Paul tells us, speak the truth in love. And so she wrote to the Department of the Interior to complain about how history was being taught and to ask them to change what they were doing. They refused.

Again, she could have given up but, instead, she used the platform that she had to spread the word about what she knew. As a professor and famous author, she traveled extensively giving lectures and promoting her books, and so she shared this story wherever she went. She wrote about it, blogged about it, and asked others to share the true story about the statue as well.

One day, she got a call from the Department of the Interior. They wanted to talk to her in person, would she please come out to Washington D.C. Very trepidatious, sure that she was going to be yelled at, she went. And when she arrived, she was greeted by the then head of the department, who apologized to her. They thanked her for the work she had done and asked if they could hire her to

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teach the true history of the statue to all of the tour guides to make sure they could tell the story correctly.

They also told her a part of the history that she hadn't known: The phrase "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," was not a part of the original statue. It was added later, in 1903, in order to change the meaning of the statue. Originally, it was the Statue of Liberty, celebrating the freedom of the slaves. But it was changed to celebrate the liberty of anyone coming to the United States. A story of black Americans, freed slaves had been co-opted by the white majority, both in order to hide their shameful past, and in order to celebrate their own freedom from their countries.

After a lifetime of receiving promises from white people that were not honored, Dr. DeGruy felt a little uncertain about whether they would honor their promises, so, a few months later, she disguised herself and went on a tour of the Statue of Liberty. Without prompting, the tour guide told everyone the story, the true story, as she had taught it. He showed them the chains at the statue's feet, and then took them inside the museum and showed them the original sketch of the statue, displayed prominently on the main floor.

After over a hundred years of a hidden and co-opted truth, this black woman was able to get the true story told. My interpretation of this story is that she was able to do this by

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allowing herself time to be angry (because you better believe that she was angry), and then by being more of who she already was—she used her knowledge, her experience, her privileges as an author and professor, her gifts of intellect, writing, speaking, and perseverance, and she relied upon her love of truth and her love for her people and all of us—a people that needed to know the truth. And she did this in the face of overwhelming odds, not really certain that it would ever make a difference.

Our ability to bless others is in us already. It comes from the gifts that God has given us, and from the good and bad experiences that have also shaped us. Whether we take time out of our week to make little velvet hearts for grieving children or use our experiences, knowledge, and inner strength to bring hidden truths to light, we are changing and healing the world. Thanks be to God.