

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.

In our sermon series this month, we've been reading Rachel Naomi Remen's *My Grandfather's Blessings* and using her ideas to help elucidate scripture. In our discussions so far, we have found that Remen has encouraged us to sit with the grief that we and others experience, to then look around and really experience the blessings that God offers us, and then to share blessings with others. The section we read for this week, "The Web of Blessing" focuses a lot on service to others—on the ways that individual blessings can affect others, like dominos or like a web.

The great theologians have often spoken about this web of blessings. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, for example, tells us that "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."¹ Likewise, the Apostle Paul tells us that we are all one body, saying in 1 Corinthians 12: 26-27, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

In many ways, all of humanity is tied together like a web, delicately connected through a spiritual bond that Jesus has tied to

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The Atlantic Monthly*; August 1963; *The Negro Is Your Brother*; Volume 212, No. 2; pages 78 - 88.

our hearts. So when one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us shares a blessing with the world, the rest of us feel that blessing.

I have seen and heard a lot of the ways this connectedness has been affecting our community in the past few weeks. As we become aware of more people affected by Covid and by the wildfires in the West and in Europe, our hearts and our bodies become full of sadness and anxiety for our world. As we read and hear about the Taliban taking over in Afghanistan and the many thousands of refugees fleeing, as we remember how women and LGBTQ+ people were treated by the Taliban in the past, we feel our anxiety and grief rising. As we hear about more people facing food and home insecurity, we ache for them. As we hear about the families and friends of church members who are ill, who are struggling to recover from surgery, who are grieving, we are filled with worry and grief ourselves. As you probably know by now, Tony Ramos passed away earlier this week. He was very well-known and loved in our church and in the community, and the pain of his death is rippling outward through our web of interconnections.

But at the same time that this web connects us in our griefs and worries, it also connects us in our blessings. When we offer one blessing to one person, it ripples outward, blessing more and more people. I didn't know Tony, but I believe that he was a part of this web of blessings. As you know, he and his family have been dedicated members of our church for many years, with Tony often helping to plan and conduct our fellowship time. I know that this

could seem like a small thing, but I don't believe that there are any truly small blessings. Fellowship time allows our congregation to bond, to share our lives more fully, and that is usually best done over food and drink. I think there was something in Tony that knew that and that yearned to bring people together. I was also told that, on his daughter's Katy's and Allie's birthdays, he and Becky would donate flowers for the church altar. Then, after the service that day, Katy and Allie would give those flowers away, sharing that blessing out into the community. And so the blessing rippled on, bringing beauty and joy.

I have heard more stories like this one throughout the summer: Freida, sharing that news of her granddaughter's surgery has spread so that people not associated with our church stop her in the store to tell her they are praying for Ava. Becky, telling me of the huge number of cards and large amounts of food being given to them in support. Virginia, telling me that someone she was caring for the in hospital asked for prayers for Kaleb, Bridgett's grandson who has cancer. A person there in the hospital for their own health crisis, asking the chaplain for prayers for child that we in our congregation are praying for—that is just amazing! The ripples of blessing extend so, so far outside of our own sphere, and ripple back to us to provide us with hope, wonder, and thanksgiving for our community when we hear these stories.

Our interconnectedness is what is behind all of the scripture readings for today. All three lessons remind us that living out our

faith, the works of our faith, are really what give our faith meaning. And the reason that that is true is precisely because we are connected to one another—one body in Christ. And so we can bless one another, not only through our loving acts of service and prayer, but also through affecting structural change.

I would like to share a story now where I brag on my mom a bit. My mom grew up in poverty and, as you know from a previous fresh perspectives, her family home was decimated by a tornado when she was very young. Her family was naturally very short in stature, but one of her older sisters was particularly short—not because of genetics, but because of poor nutrition in the womb. Her mom just didn't have enough to eat when she was pregnant. All of these life experiences were hard on my mom and her sisters, but it, combined with their Christian upbringing, caused them to want to try to make sure that others didn't have to face what they did. So they all became public servants in some form, my mom becoming a dietitian. She worked in hospitals and Head-Start, taught nutrition in a college, and then went back into public health, helping low-income moms and pregnant women to gain the nutrition that they and their babies needed to thrive. I am not kidding you when I say that she saved lives doing that job. Ask me for stories some time.

But when she was a college professor, she also helped write the nutrition section of the Michigan Model for Health in the 1980s. This model provided nutrition curriculum for children K-12th grade throughout the state and was eventually implemented in many

places throughout the country. If you were a teacher in the 1980s, chances are that you used the curriculum she developed and so, too, are connected directly to my mom's work. Thus, she tried to tackle the problems of nutrition deficiency at a systemic level, providing nutrition education for children, parents, and teachers. She also joined the political party that she believed would advance and support laws and policies that would help prevent food insecurity. She then advocated for those candidates, knowing that system changes can be a way of affecting even more people in the web.

I believe that this is part of what we're called to do as Christians—to find a way to make systemic changes, when we can. When I was a student in seminary, our New Testament professor provided an interpretation of today's reading from Ephesians that I found compelling. That letter urges us to stand firm against the powers of this world that would drive us apart, that would cause us to ignore the needs of one member of our body. We all do this, right? Perhaps because we regard that one member as less important than our other parts or perhaps because we feel compelled to focus first on our own needs. Our professor said that that force of evil discussed in this scripture is not a person or a thing so much as it is a system—poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity, racism—all the things that keep individuals from being able to thrive fully. If we tie together all of our lessons from today, then, it seems that we are called to act—to serve one another

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through our volunteer work and through advocating for changes of our nation's, and our world's, systems.

In the end, the web that ties our hearts one to another lets us know when someone in the web is in need. Getting that signal along the web is, itself, a blessing to us because it shows us the opportunity God is setting before us to serve one another. But then when we act, whether it be through seemingly small acts with profound consequences, or through advocacy that leads to nation-wide consequences, we are sending another signal back along that web: You are seen. You are loved. You are not alone, because you are a "we." Thanks be to God!