

October 18, 2009
Sermon - The Very Rev. Bill Lupfer

I gave my life to Christ, October 14, 1976, in Howard Ammerlind's living room. I was in high school at the time, and realized that the life I was living at the time, hadn't quite congealed in the way I was looking for. So I dedicated my life to Christ. And right when that happened, I saw that I didn't really know anything...so I started looking for answers. And I went on an adventure, of searching for answers. And every time I sort of figured something out...I'd put it there. And I'd realize there's another question; I'd put another answer. And I built this edifice of answers. And I imagine I got pretty obnoxious, with knowing everything, and so...it came to me at one point--through my mother--words from my grandfather. My grandfather at that time was still working...it must have been 100 hours a week...he loved to work...and so he never really talked much to me. I could see him. He was visual, but not verbal to me. But through my mother, came a question: "Bill...have you ever read Job, Chapter 38?" I can imagine the conversation that led to that. "Hmm...thinks he knows everything, huh? Tell him to read Job, Chapter 38." And I quickly went to the Bible, and read Job, Chapter 38. And everything opened up again. Maybe you've had that experience...where you move from a slippery attempt to get answers that hold...you move from that, back into the question...and live those questions again.

It was a profound opening for me, kind of like when I walked on the beach here in Oregon, and turned my face to the Pacific, and go...(breathes in)...ah, I can breathe again. Those places of profound opening...I believe we're called to that, even as we practice our faith. Those openings break in. And so, as those windows of grace open in our lives, and God's Holy Spirit blows right over us, like a strong wind on the coast...when we do that, and those windows of grace open...we have that chance to breathe again...to breathe deeply, and to open to the reality that we are not in control of this life...and that there's always going to be many more questions than answers...even as we seek the answers.

This Fall, we are in our annual Giving Campaign, and the theme has been Counting Our Blessings. So, like your dutiful dean, I've been talking with you about blessings, and offering ways to count your blessings. We have blessing cards in the pews. And one of the things I've been doing, as I critique myself, is what I've been talking about, is suggesting that blessings are always "out there." They're external to you, and you have to go outside, count them...a friend, a relation, something that happened. Those are the blessings...outside, external. But sometimes, we get to a place, where we cannot see those blessings anymore. Each of us, at some time, we get cloudy and we don't see the blessings. I believe at that point, God is inviting us to BE the blessing for others. It won't work if we only have blessings out there, to us. We have to be in a relationship, don't we?...of mutuality. We count the blessings that come to us. But part of it is...we become the blessing, to others.

Now there is a spiritual practice, that leads us into an intentional becoming the blessing. And I'm going to share it with you now. It's something I try to practice, and I think you may want to put it in your spiritual repertoire. When you're in that place of dullness,

and you can't count the blessings...time to become a blessing. It's called the practice of lovingkindness. The psalm talked about love. It all comes back to love. The practice of lovingkindness is a four-fold way of opening ourselves back up, to those questions.

It begins with that spiritual experience of being on the beach, or reading Job, Chapter 38. It begins--the first step--with saying, claiming the vast love of God...that is much larger than I am, makes sense in a way that I can never quite nail it down. I will set my heart and mind, on the infinite love of God. And whatever image it requires to help you get there, use it: the beach...maybe you're looking at Mount Hood on a crystal-clear day...maybe you're standing on top, looking at Mount Jefferson. Whatever image helps you get to that yawning chasm of God's love...that's bigger than anything you have...go there. Find that place. And then, right away,...into that place, allow the cloudiness that's in your own heart...and bring an image that will help you there. For me, that cloudiness is often...maybe diesel bus fumes in Tokyo...they're still kind of stinky in Tokyo. They're actually pretty eco-sensitive, but they smell. So...a bus goes through God's glorious grandiosity. But with the open space, the fullness of God's love...that small little toxic cloud dissipates easily. So put a bus on the beach, when the wind is blowing hard, and the sky is open to you. The fumes go away pretty quickly. And part of the imagination, is that whatever little toxic cloud you are creating, within God's infinite love for you, and others...that cloud dissipates, and goes into God's love...in a way that the freshness stays.

So those are the first and second steps. Then in the practice of lovingkindness, it's time to bring it into your breathing. That's where most spiritual practice ends up, --in breath. And so there's a breath prayer. Usually, if I'm stuck, I go into a breath prayer that goes something like this: I receive God's grace, and infinite love into me. And I let go of that little toxic cloud. That's how I usually do it. But the practice of lovingkindness reverses it! YOU claim, within yourself, that infinite love of God, that you've been created in that image. And so when you breathe in, you breathe in the little toxic cloud. Now that might be anger at a friend or family; it might be resentment; it might be concern for violence in this world. Whatever that difficult place is for you, that's causing you to lose sight of your blessings...breathe it in! And then breathe out...that blessing that God gives. Let that blessing come from you. Claim the fact you're created in the image of God, and you're not just a spiritual consumer that needs to eat constantly. But you're also someone of maturity, who can give. So the breath is IN the negativity, or the anger, or the upset. And then breathing OUT, that part that is the infinite love of God...that comes out of your heart...out of your soul.

It's this kind of practice, that is the only way I have found, to pray for those who persecute me. Do you remember Jesus saying, "Pray for those who persecute you." Have you ever tried it? Intentionally? To a way where you get to peace? It's hard! But if you start opening your heart to that infinite love, and then visualize that that toxic piece is pretty minor, and then bring that minor negativity in, to that infinite place in your own heart. And then have the audacity to become the blessing, and breathe out God's love, and God's grace. You'll find that you can pray for those who persecute you, bug you, annoy you. Sometimes when I'm in my own cloud of unknowing...and it's late at night...and I'm wrestling with the demons...I'll pray this prayer of lovingkindness, And I

sleep like a baby! Because that's what happens to us, I think, when we really open our hearts to the infinite, almighty God of Job 38, and we live the question. I pray, as you count your blessings, you'll also be a blessing.