

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY—BLESSINGS THAT EMPOWER
Matthew 20:20-28

Grace For The Journey Message Series
Confirmation Sunday—May 3, 2015
Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

It was just like any concerned parent. Her two sons, James & John, had been training for months under this famous teacher named Jesus; this Jesus whose reputation for healing and other miracles was widespread; who was proclaimed to be the long awaited Messiah.

So now this Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem; he was speaking of his imminent death and resurrection; of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Therefore it was a natural thing for a parent to do, to fall on her knees and ask Jesus for a favor.

“What is it you want?” asked Jesus. “Grant that one of these two sons of mine,” she said, “may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” She had ideas of splendor and greatness for her boys.

Yet who of us as parents (friends/relatives) do not blush as we remember similar times we have pushed for certain favors. *“My daughter really deserves to be in that event; she is really talented.” “My child should be starting and playing more on this team; he/she is certainly much better than so and so.”*

“My grandchild should have that important position in your business, you won't regret it.” “My friend should get that key promotion, they're the best.” “My child should get into that school or program, they have the potential for great things.” “Won't you give this person a special break, I'll owe you one if you do.”

Jesus however said to this woman that she didn't know what she was asking. God's kingdom will not be reached by ways of personal favors, by smooth or convincing talk, only by the way of the cross. This truth, according to Jesus, is that anyone who wants to be a really great person must first of all be a servant of others.

Too often today people want power and greatness. We want personal favors because of who we are; the family we represent; because of the title or position our work gives us; because we may have money/wealth. Jesus however says that true greatness is not found in those things.

It is found in being a servant; in seeking what is best for others; in helping our children (relatives, friends) to find the blessing of life and meaning as God intended.

Christian writers Gary Smalley & John Trent, in their book *“The Blessing”* talk about a way to use the power in our lives to empower children and youth (relatives/friends)--to bring out the best in them. What they suggest is that we go back to the Old Testament concept of blessing; that we find very specific ways to bless others. They list five ways:

The first blessing is that of meaningful touch. Every time a blessing was given in the Bible it was accompanied by some kind of touch—hugging, kissing, laying on of hands. This of course is essential to empower the blessing because touch communicates warmth, acceptance, personal affirmation, love. Sometimes touch is so powerful it even brings physical healing.

Smalley & Trent point out that one third of our five million bodily touch receptors are located in our hands and fingers. Everyday researchers are finding increased data about the power of touch. Some even suggest that if the Type A people among us would do more hugging it would increase their life span by up to two years. (Today we lay our hands on our Confirmands).

The second blessing is that of the spoken word—blessings always depend on words as well as actions. Children, youth and adults need to hear a message of love, acceptance, encouragement; they need to hear it again and again. Words are very important; they can either build a person up or destroy them.

I have visited with lots of people over the years who have told me that their father, mother, teacher, coach, friends never encouraged them; never built them up. Rather, all they were told was they should have done better; should have tried harder; should have been more than they were. Instead of giving a blessing these people had withheld their favor. It is so important to speak positive words that empower (another integral part of this Confirmation service).

A third blessing is to demonstrate the high value we place on others. The Bible says we were created in the image of God; given infinite worth. What we need to do is show our children, youth and friends how much we value them.

Yet so often our praise is linked with performance. If someone does well we honor them; if they do not do well we ignore them. If people need to succeed in order to gain approval then they will wonder, am I loved for who I am or for what I do? We bless a person by demonstrating their incredible value to us. (At Messiah we value our youth, children and adults).

A fourth blessing has to do with helping shape a vision for a person's future. We want each person to see a positive future for them; to be filled with hope and excitement; to know we believe in them. In this troubled world there are some who wonder if they have any future at all. We bless people by helping them focus on hope and promise (Confirmation weekly purpose).

A man was standing outside the delivery room of the hospital holding his first born son who was just minutes old. The man's mother, the baby's grandmother, was swooning over this precious little baby. She then quipped to her son, *“How could anyone as dumb, clutzy and ugly as you have such a darling little child?”*

Tears welled up in the eyes of the new father as he said to his mother, *“Stop it! That's all I've ever heard from you. It has taken me years to believe I'm not ugly and dumb. Why do you think I stayed away from home so much? I don't want to be called those names ever again!”*

The mother was stunned; tears came to her eyes; she had just been joking. Without realizing the impact of her words this mother had for years consistently kidded her children about being

stupid, fat, ugly. This came naturally to her—after all she had been kidded unmercifully by her own mother when she was growing up.

Just think of the messages we often give others: you are a slob; if you look like that no one will ever want to date you; you are dumb and will never get into college with grades like that. When we focus on the inadequacies people often adopt that attitude.

However to give a blessing means to vision a positive future; to share our Christ-centered hope; to share how God's Spirit is working within; to help bring out the best in each other.

The fifth blessing is that of an active commitment to the well being of another. We must communicate that we are deeply commitment to them; to their future; their present; their success; their happiness. Smalley & Trent tell the story of a young girl was not very good in math.

The first day the teacher told that class that most likely one-half of the students will fail; this is typical in his class. As the weeks went by sure enough, one half of the class was failing including this girl.

However suddenly this teacher had to take a leave of absence and a new teacher was assigned. The first thing she told the class was this, *“If anyone fails this class then I have failed. I will do whatever I am able to do in order to help you do well. If you will put forth the effort, I will do whatever is necessary.”*

As a result she worked with the students; she met with them after school; she changed the learning climate; everyone passed and this young girl received her first “A” in math.

We bless people by making an active commitment to their well being. When a person is weak, encouragement is essential. Words are not enough; actions are also required. One way to do this these authors suggest is for us to become students of our children and others. Find out what is going on inside of them; try to understand their emotions; what are their hopes and fears?

I heard of a father whose six year old son was playing on his first baseball team. After the first game the father asked his son, *“Tell me, what was the best part for you today?”* His son thought for awhile and then said, *“I got to sit next to Kevin—he's my friend.”*

This wise father then said, *“You're right, the most important part of any game is to be with your friends.”* The fifth blessing is to make an active commitment to the best interests of another. This Confirmands is Charis' and my commitment to you today and in these years to come; and may it be the commitment of each parent, relative and friend here today.

Matthew 20 teaches us that true greatness and power is seen in becoming a servant like Jesus; in being sensitive and committed to helping the needs of others. May God's Spirit empower you to be Christ's servants; to use your power and abilities to bring true and lasting blessings to all.