

### **#Blessed**

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning! I am so excited to be here this morning and to begin my call as your pastor of mission and outreach. I'm filled with anticipation for the coming weeks, months, and years as we live into this new thing that we're all doing together – a joint call that represents the beautiful partnership that First Trinity and St. Matthew's have developed over the past number of years. We'll explore new and renewed ways to grow in relationship with our neighbors here in Penn Quarter and in Southwest. We'll listen for the Holy Spirit as she prods us on to adventures of which we cannot see the ending. First Trinity and St. Matthew's are blessed with many gifts – people, space, creativity, music, faithfulness – and these blessings are blessings for others.

Today's reading from Ephesians begins with an exuberant pronouncement of blessing: "blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." The author of Ephesians – probably not Paul, but someone who writes in his style - is ecstatically happy: in fact, the entire passage we read today is a long expression – almost a run-on sentence - of his joy for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. God has blessed us, and the author of Ephesians wants to make sure that the various congregations reading this letter understand how and why they are blessed.

And so he goes on to talk about the blessings the Ephesian Christians have received: they have been chosen, they are adopted as God's children, they receive an inheritance, the gift of grace has been freely given to them, they participate in God's plan for the fullness of time, and so on. There are so many blessings. Each could have its own sermon or sermon series to plumb the depths of what each one means. But it's a Sunday in July, and I hear there's a big soccer game, so we'll save that for the future and instead focus on the words "blessing" and "blessed."

What is a blessing? Our culture is filled to the brim with its versions of "blessing." Google tells me that it can mean God's favor or protection, or something that makes you happy or contributes to your general well-being, or approval or encouragement. It's also what you say before eating a meal.

Instagram tells me that being blessed means having the perfect beach body, hanging out with friends in beautiful places, or crushing your gym goals. Or that's at least what a search for #blessed reveals.

Some prosperity gospel preachers tell me that God wants to bless me with health and wealth. A new car is a blessing. I am blessed if my cancer goes into remission. Of course, the

converse is also true: if I don't have those things, or if I continue to be sick, I don't have God's blessing, so I'd better shape up and pray harder if I know what's good for me.

All of these definitions and examples are interesting, and it is good to be thankful for things that are enjoyable and good, such as friends, grandchildren, a roof over your head, and the like. But I don't think this is what the author of Ephesians means by blessing. So, let's go back to the Bible to see what it says about blessing.

Let's start with Abram and Sarai. They are told to leave their home and go to a new land. God promises, in return, and I'm quoting from Genesis 12 here, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God makes a covenant, a promise with them: obey me and you will be blessed. Abram and Sarai obeyed God and were then blessed by God – God gave them favor, protection, and offspring. All of these blessings were given so that they, through their descendants, would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. And they were. They not only received a new home, but also new names – Abraham and Sarah – and a child in the process. This has led to a long line of people and communities that have inherited that blessing: Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, the Israelites – individuals, families, and a people - all of whom became blessings for the world. And this long line of blessing leads to Jesus, the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the entire world.

The author of Ephesians sees the members of the church as inheriting this blessing through Jesus Christ. Jesus brings them into this long line of blessing where they too are put into right relationship with God. They are God's children through Jesus and can inherit all of God's promises and blessings. This is a blessing! They are included in God's great plan to bless the entire world! Isn't this great?

I want to stop here and point out two things: first, the blessings he's talking about are not individual blessings. The congregations in Ephesus are not a group of people who have been individually blessed. Instead, they're a blessed *group* of people. He uses lots of first-person pronouns: *we* have inherited, just as he chose *us*. As the church, we are a blessed community. Just like the blessing pronounced on Abraham and Sarah, God's blessing goes beyond individual blessings to blessings that are bestowed on communities, on groups of people gathered together in Christ's name. We are recipients of that grace. God has included us in God's plan for the world. We are called children of God.

And second, these blessings are meant to be shared with others. Again, just as Abraham and Sarah were blessed to be a blessing for others, so too are we called together to be a community of blessing that shares the blessings we receive with all around us. In sharing these blessings, we are participating with God in God's work to bless the entire world.

First Trinity and St. Matthew's are a community of blessing. God has blessed us in so many ways as a community – blessings that just wouldn't make sense if they were reserved for individuals. I think of the wonderful partnership in ministry First Trinity and St. Matthew's have developed over the past decade as we gather together for worship, fellowship, and

service. I also think of the joy of the number of baptisms we have had over the past year, the joy of welcoming the newest members of the body of Christ into our midst and seeking to prepare them to go out into the world and live out their identity as God's children. I also think of the ways we have raised up leaders to serve the church – lay and ordained serving in congregations, and the countless ways we bring our faith to our relationships, jobs, and daily lives. I also think of the ways we strive to welcome our neighbors, both local and global, into worship with us here on a Sunday or by supporting them as they transition to life in a new place. God has blessed us in so many ways, and we have shared these blessings with many!

I pray that we continue to discover ways that God has blessed this community and how we can be a community of blessing that shares these blessings with all whom we encounter.

Let me share with you a vision of how God's blessing to us will be a blessing to others. We have some great opportunities to do this. We are participating in the Metro DC Synod's New Connections Campaign, in which we're striving to connect more deeply with each other and our neighbors and, by doing so, reach out to and connect with new people. What a great way to share our blessings with others! As St. Matthew's prepares to move back to Southwest, we have a new neighborhood of people to get to know and to connect with. Here in Penn Quarter and NoMA, the landscape and population is changing rapidly, meaning it's inevitable that we will have a number of opportunities to connect with new people, or get to know familiar faces even more deeply. We can use our blessings of partnership, joy, formation, and hospitality to connect with other communities, and pass on these blessings to them.

Blessings are blessings when they are given to communities. Blessings are blessings when they are shared. We are a community of blessing that can share our blessings with others.

Sharing the blessings we have received is central to our identity as children of God. It is part of our baptismal vocation, which includes participation in God's mission to the world. God wants to bring the world back into right relationship with God. Some call this redemption or reconciliation. This can also be called *blessing*. God wants to *bless* the entire world, to gather the entire world into a community of blessing. And we are called to participate in God's work to bless the world through freely and lovingly sharing the blessings we have received. Through faith, we have been set free to love and serve God and neighbor in Jesus' name, and we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit who sends us out to do this work of blessing.

So, let's get to it! Let's get to work with God! Let's spend time naming and celebrating the ways that God has blessed First Trinity and St. Matthew's. And then let's share these blessings with others, so that they may see and experience them, and give glory to God. We can do this, confident in the guidance and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, knowing that wherever we go, Christ is there waiting to meet us.

Thanks be to God,  
AMEN.