

**Broken and Blessed**  
**St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church**  
**March 16, 2014**  
**Prepared by Tim Moon**

I like to fix things that are broken. Now some of my motivation is noble. I want to fix it so that it can function as it is intended. Some of my motivation is frugality, with a dash of stubbornness. And some of it is creativity. When Katie and I moved here, we packed ourselves. Now, there is a reason they call professional movers “professional,” they actually know what they are doing. This is especially important because our fine New Orleans streets rattled and jostled our belongings like an oversized popcorn machine. And as I opened our U-haul, our coffee maker shot out of the truck like a cannon. And while the carafe didn’t break, the coffee maker was damaged. And now that I was a New Orleanian, not having a coffee pot was just not an option. So after much deliberation, I used some duct tape and a toothpick, and Voila, a functional coffee pot. I like to fix things that are broken. And on a much grander and more transformative scale, we have a God who likes to fix things that are broken.

In Genesis 3-11, known as the Primeval history, we see instance after instance of human kind missing the mark. Adam and Eve, Cain, the flood, and the tower of Babel. There is a wealth of brokenness and barrenness in these chapters, but God loves to bless things that are broken.

As we move forward into our lectionary text, Abraham, the father of Israel, is no father at all by his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Sarah, the mother of Israel, is barren. The mother and father of a nation are incapable of providing the most important ingredient of a nation, descendants. Today family can take many forms: families who choose not to have children, choose to adopt children, bear children, bear children and adopt children, etc., but in Abram and Sarah’s day, children were expected. And let me take a moment to distinguish between barren and broken. When I say barren, I mean struggles that are out of our control, and when I say broken, I mean choices

that are hurtful to ourselves and others. I may use these terms somewhat interchangeably today to represent any pain in our lives.

And as Abraham and Sarah made a life for themselves in Haran, this barrenness was always on display. At the local well, the gossip would begin. “Oh, Sarah and Abe, Bless their hearts. Did you know they just can’t have kids? And they are getting a little old to keep trying.”

We know this phrase “bless their hearts.” A southernism of sorts, that is just an excuse to say something bad about someone else. Like “bless his heart, did you see that tie that Tim is wearing today, it clashes with his eyes.” So these voices were weighing on Abraham and Sarah. I imagine they were starting to give up on the possibility of children, resigning themselves to their fate. But we know the story, because it’s our story... In the midst of our brokenness, God blesses us and empowers us to bless others.

The heart of God’s mission is to fix things, redeem and restore things. And the covenant here in Genesis 12 is one of the key passages outlying God’s intention for the future of creation. In Hebrew, the words “go” and “be a blessing” stand out in the text. Each are imperatives, giving commands to Abraham and his descendants. And often in Hebrew when two imperatives are coupled together, the second one is the intended purpose of the first one. In other words, Abraham is asked to go in faith, so that, and for the purpose of being a blessing. So blessing isn’t a static concept, but one to be done in the action of faith. This text is so central to God’s story that Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright points out it’s connection to the Great Commission in Matthew. Wright says “it is here in the words of the risen Jesus that we are given the means by which the original Abrahamic commission can be fulfilled, to ‘Go... and be a blessing... and all the nations on earth will find blessing through you.’”<sup>1</sup> So even Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are pointing back to this original covenant of God’s intent to bless all nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 244.

Our very calling as God's people is to be bearers of blessing for the entire world. We, broken and barren, are agents of God's blessing. And in the midst of our imperfection, God entrusts us and empowers us to carry out his plan for redeeming and restoring the world. And as we let this truth sink in, it can be both empowering and frightening, can't it?

God believes in us. And believes in our goodness, but we can tell ourselves a number of lies that keep us from believing we can be a blessing. The first lie is over-believing in ourselves, which you could call entitlement. I mean, as the years wear on, I could see this temptation in Abraham and Sarah. They are sitting with their growing boy Isaac, enjoying a lavish meal and a good life. How easy would it have been for them to forget the source of their blessings? How easy is it for us to attribute the good things in our life to our own doing?

And in times where we forget this source, we move into seeing blessings as things we deserve. Writer, Rob Bell says when we forget God's work in our lives, "it becomes easier and easier to confuse blessing with entitlement." And later he mentions that "Entitlement leads to immunity to the suffering of others, because 'I got what I deserve' and so, apparently, did they."<sup>2</sup> This creates an us vs. them mentality because it connects blessing to our worth in society. Suddenly, we are blessed because we worked hard enough or did the right things. And our heart no longer aches as much for the hungry, the poor, and the homeless, because in some sense, they brought it upon themselves. And this is a subtle and dangerous narrative that can keep us from being bearers of blessing. Because in it, we forget where our blessings really come from.

In the story of Abraham and Sarah, God flips barrenness on its head and creates blessing, and the couple are able to recognize God as the source of these gifts. And I think this recognition of source is crucial in understanding blessing. Christopher Wright says "What modern secular man calls 'luck' or 'success' the Old Testament calls 'blessing,' for it insists that God alone is the source of all good

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus wants to save Christians: a manifesto for the church in exile*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008) , 124.

fortune.”<sup>3</sup> So while everyone on earth has both good and bad fortune, the Jewish/Christian concept of blessing points back to the source of these wonderful and beautiful, unearthly gifts of grace.

And in our modern time, the word blessing has become watered down. We say God bless you after a sneeze, we see God bless America on a bumper sticker, we say a blessing before a meal, we even have a sign in our bathrooms that says “Please! Be considerate of others flush the toilet when you finish and we will bless you for it!” I don’t even really know what that means. We hear the word so often and in so many contexts that it can lose it’s source. So I think it may be helpful to have an alternate word to use in addition to blessing. Could we call the blessings in our lives “gifts of grace?” A reminder that God is the source of blessing. And a reminder that we are blessed because of who God is rather than what we do.

Entitlement. That’s the first lie. The other lie that can keep us from being a blessing is under-believing in ourselves. Everyday, we can hear those voices that we aren’t good enough, smart enough, important enough. We build a narrative where our brokenness is too much, we are too wounded to be a blessing. For Abraham and Sarah, we see this moment later on in their lives of faith. While they trusted God in the beginning of their journey, they grew weary and hopeless as this self-deprecating voice started to creep in. “You’re barren. You’re getting too old to have a child. You can’t do this.” And we know this desperation reaches a tipping point in chapter 16 when Abraham has a child with Hagar. They doubted themselves and they doubted God.

The real danger of living either of these lies is that we give too much power to our brokenness. We let it win. In entitlement, we allow it to make us feel little responsibility for those who are suffering. And in self-deprecation, we become paralyzed by a sense of inadequacy.

As we experience our brokenness, we remember that God trusts us to be a blessing to all the world. He sees potential in the midst of our brokenness. And even though we often forget this our

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, 209.

reality, we were created in his image. In chapter 2 of Genesis, God blesses us and calls us very good. God created us to bear his image and be his blessed people from the beginning. In his book *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen asserts how crucial it is to remind someone they are blessed. "To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or appreciation; it is more than pointing out someone's talents or good deeds; it is more than putting someone in the light. To give a blessing is to affirm, to say 'yes' to a person's Belovedness. And more than that: it creates the reality of which it speaks."<sup>4</sup> It is transformative when, we, the church affirm others, calling all people good and beloved.

This past week, I read an article of a peculiar Lenten practice. Kent McKeever, a lawyer in Waco, TX made a decision to wear an orange prison jump suit for the 40 days of Lent. By joining in solidarity with prisoners, he is hoping to shed light on many injustices that prisoners face. In particular, how difficult it is for ex-cons to find decent employment after serving their time. He is advocating for more employers to give second chances.<sup>5</sup> Through McKeever's Lenten practice, he is saying yes to a prisoner's belovedness. To be a blessing is to remind others that they are good and beloved by God.

To be God's people beckons us to hold in tension that we are both broken and blessed. So how can we bless in the midst of our brokenness? Henri Nouwen suggests that we begin to overcome the lies of brokenness by befriending it and putting it under the blessing. Nouwen says "My own pain in life has taught me that the first step to healing is not a step away from the pain, but a step toward it. ...Yes, we have to find the courage to embrace our own brokenness, to make our most feared enemy into a friend, and to claim it as an intimate

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<sup>4</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the beloved: spiritual living in a secular world* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 68-69.

<sup>5</sup> J.B. Smith, "Attorney suits up in jailhouse orange for Lent." WacoTrib.com. [http://www.wacotrib.com/news/religion/attorney-suits-up-in-jailhouse-orange-for-lent/article\\_dd607242-17ed-5de1-a7b7-dc342c744732.html](http://www.wacotrib.com/news/religion/attorney-suits-up-in-jailhouse-orange-for-lent/article_dd607242-17ed-5de1-a7b7-dc342c744732.html) (accessed March 16, 2014).

companion.”<sup>6</sup> So instead of running from our brokenness and pain, we shed light on it. When we acknowledge that we can hurt others and ourselves, it begins to loosen the grip that brokenness has over us. It can help us move from embarrassment to recognition and change.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller gives a wonderful example of using brokenness to be a blessing. Miller took classes at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, which was a secular school. Each year, the college held a wildly debauched festival called Ren Fayre. He and a few of his Christian friends decided to hold a confessing booth, but instead of having people confess their sins, Miller and the other Christians confessed the sins of Christianity to anyone who would listen. Over the course of the evening, they confessed that the church had missed the mark with the Crusades, with imperialism that ravaged countries in the name of “missions,” and with so often failing to feed the poor and heal the sick. It was a very powerful moment, where followers of Christ shined light on both their collective and individual brokenness. Because of the confessing booth experience, Miller said “I felt very connected to God because I had confessed so much to so many people and had gotten so much off my chest and I had been forgiven by the people I had wronged with my indifference and judgmentalism.”<sup>7</sup> And he goes on to admit that this was a turning point in his journey of faith. What a release it must have been to own the brokenness, so that it no longer controlled or paralyzed him. By shedding light on the brokenness of the church and its people, Miller was able to move past embarrassment and into transformation.

How can we at St. Charles Avenue Baptist be bearers of blessing? We must first begin by embracing ourselves. Brokenness and all. Our individual self as well as our collective body. And we must engage others. We must seek out those in need in our community. We must unveil injustice for the sake of others for if one suffers, we all suffer.

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<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Miller, *Blue like jazz: nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 2003), 126.

For instance, in Louisiana, 1 in 6 people are struggling with hunger.<sup>8</sup> And in New Orleans, roughly 30% of households had children suffering from food hardship.<sup>9</sup> This is a deep brokenness, and as descendents of Abraham and Sarah, we are called to be bearers of blessing into situations such as this. Over the past couple of weeks, I have had the pleasure of meeting with the Mission Action Committee. We are in the midst of planning a community garden, which we hope will eventually provide food for local food banks. We are hoping to host a documentary night to learn more about food insecurity. And we are planning a food drive to work alongside Second Harvest.

We are broken and blessed, but God calls us to be gifts of grace to our world because of his many gifts of grace to us. At the end of his chapter on brokenness, Henri Nouwen recalls a scene from Leonard Bernstein's musical, *Mass*. At one point, a priest drops a beautiful chalice that smashes into countless pieces. He walks over to the broken remains, stares, and then says "I never realized that broken glass could shine so brightly."<sup>10</sup> How often do we see broken glass and think, what a mess? And how often are we so focused on our tiny world that we miss the beautiful glare from that which is broken? From THOSE who are broken? Because God shines through people that are broken and blessed.

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, may we be a broken and blessed people that shine the light of God's love and grace into all the world.

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<sup>8</sup> "About Hunger - Second Harvest Food Bank." About Hunger - Second Harvest Food Bank. <http://no-hunger.org/AboutHunger.aspx> (accessed March 16, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> "Hunger in NOLA." No Kid Hungry. <http://neworleans.nokidhungry.org/hunger-nola> (accessed March 16, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, 102.

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