

“Blessed to Be A Blessing”
Feast of St. Michael and All Angels
September 30, 2007

Texts:

Genesis 28:10-17

John 1:47-51

One Friday evening, several years ago, during a wedding rehearsal dinner, I witnessed an occasion of a new beginning. It came during the time of toasting the bride and groom. I was deeply moved when the father of the groom stood and toasted his son...I still hear the father saying:

“Son, whatever happens to you in your life, whether you have success or not, become important or not, will be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I value you and love you....I’ve realized that it’s not too early to say this to you because I don’t know when it will be too late.”

I remember thinking that this father had gone way beyond the normal toast...he had, in fact, given his son a blessing!

That story has come to mind more than once as my family and I have prepared to move to Dallas. Because you have already been a blessing to us and I extend to the Search Committee, Vestry, Staff and many others, my profound thanks for what you have already said and done.

The story has come to mind because my sincere hope for our ministry together is that we’ll go way beyond an ordinary toast and allow God to bless us with a challenging and compelling witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the event of the father’s toast has come to mind because in our violent, fearful, critical and anxious world people are in desperate need of a blessing....teachers and students, priests and parishioners, government and citizens, husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, nations with nations.

The father’s toast has come to mind because it speaks so well to the theme of our Gospel lesson. In our Gospel text for this Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels there is a scene where Jesus watches Nathanael as he approaches and greets the skeptic with a blessing:

“Well, now here is an honest to goodness person of Israel.” In other words – “You are an honest and forthright Jew.....no guile here, you are not a fake!....You’re the real McCoy!” This is the finest thing anyone could say to an ancient Jew! It would be the same as if Jesus were to say:

“You are a solid and benevolent Texan!” or “You are dedicated and patriotic American!” or “You are a committed servant of the Lord.”

Jesus captures Nathanael's attention! The conversation goes to a deeper level. Nathanael asks, "How do you know who and what I am? Jesus replies, "I knew you before you came; in fact, I knew you before Phillip met you....I know you quite well...I know the real you!" Nathanael is stunned and awed...his skepticism melts like a snowball in Death Valley. He responds, "I believe! You are the Son of God!"

Jesus then takes the encounter deeper –

"In the future you will realize the full measure and purpose of your believing. You will see the heavens opened up and angels coming down upon and going up from the Son of Man." In other words – "You're blessed to be a blessing."

Now, regarding God's blessing of us, Jesus gives us a vivid demonstration in his encounter with Nathanael and the question is posed – whose approval do you seek? Where do you and I find value? In short, for whom or for what do we live?

There is a prevalent and mistaken notion in the Christian pilgrimage that we have to attain self-improvement before we receive God's blessing. That the scripture text "Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" means that we can somehow clean ourselves up before God will love us.

I love the story of the preacher who asked rhetorically – "Is anyone perfect" and unexpectedly a man stood up in the back of the church. "Are you perfect", the preacher asked? "No, I'm standing up for my wife's first husband."

If only we listen to His voice and receive His embrace instead of going to many other places.

I bought a boat once...I was much younger then and I didn't know any better. I was influenced by my friends in the Church and the incredible allure of the water. I spent way too high a percentage of my income for that boat, but I thought it would be life-giving for me. I was wrong! Every time I had a day off, or even a half-day off, I would go outside to go some where, that boat would speak to me.... It would say: "You paid too much for me..." "you and others are doing without things so you can have me...therefore, it is your responsibility to use me whenever you have any spare time at all...now, go get your truck, hook my trailer, and let's go have fun, fun, fun." I didn't possess the boat, it possessed me!"

In her salty spiritual autobiography, Ann Lamott describes her own week of reckoning. "I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, and smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and went for slow walks along the salt marsh. Although, I was physically alive, I was really dead....dead to my two small children, dead to my dreams, dead to my old friends. One Saturday night though drinking heavily and just about to take an overdose, I discovered the church of second chances. I walked up the center aisle and sat down. I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. After a while in the dark, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life

and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends. I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian and I really began to live, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my pew, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing Him with, I was seeing him with my insecure and hungry soul.

And one week later, I went back to church. I was so hung over that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. I will die to my past and die to my self will ... You can come in. So this was my beautiful moment of conversion, dying and living in the same moment."

How did Jesus Bless His Disciples – then and now?

- 1) He called them by name;
- 2) Every time it involved a meaningful touch;
- 3) His blessings contained words and deeds!;
- 4) He attached intrinsic value to each person;
- 5) He pictured a distinctive purpose and mission for each person;
- 6) He blessed others by placing each person within a community of faith;
- 7) He fed them and empowered them to be witnesses; and,
- 8) He walked with them every step of the way.

New friends – St. Michael and All Angels is blessed to be a blessing! The father said during his toast: "It's never too early to say this because I never know when it might be too late."

If you've never received a blessing, you can receive it this morning...the Risen Lord is waiting to meet us at the rail. And may we go forth as a congregation receiving Christ's blessing and bless others in the name of Christ.