

**November 16, 2014**

**“The Yoke of Blessing”**

**Genesis 12:1-9**

It was an orphanage, but then again, it wasn't really an orphanage. The majority of little boys who live at the orfanato URPI in Ayacucho, Peru have parents who are living. Their parents, however, have left them at URPI most often because they cannot afford to feed them. Other parents are so entangled in the coca trade they left their boys there knowing they are safer living away from home. So I found myself, in 2007, working in an orphanage where I was taking care of boys who were mostly not orphans.

The orfanato was a sparse square with concrete floors and a sunny central courtyard where the boys played soccer. There was one large room filled with tables and chairs for eating, one large room with bunk beds for sleeping, a large restroom with rows of sinks, toilets, and showers, an office for the director, and nothing more. At first glance, I saw absolutely no toys except for the single ball the boys were kicking around the dusty courtyard. I later realized that besides the single drawer each boy had to keep his clothing, they would use their bunks as a kind of locker. Any toy a boy might have been given or found, he would hide under the covers of his bed. Most boys would only own one or two toys, and so toys were absolutely sacred. Still, despite the almost complete absence of “things” at the orfanato, it seemed – to the boys - that they had enough. Laughter was always running down the concrete hallways and from the showers singing trailed out with steam.

Coming home to the United States proved much more difficult for me than caring for 33 little boys in Peru. I looked around my apartment and I felt the weight of all the blessings in my life heavy on my shoulders like a yoke. I walked around the Harvard Campus haunted by the sweet faces of sweet, smart, talented little boys who would never know the joy of learning in a college or have the privilege of picking a career path like me. They would be lucky to be cab drivers who could feed their children. I felt powerless to help those children who I had left behind. I felt enormous guilt. It seemed so senseless that I should be so blessed while my boys in Ayacucho struggled.

In our scripture reading this morning, God asks Abraham to do a crazy thing. God asks Abraham – a 75 year old man – to pack up his entire clan, take down their tents, round up the sheep and goats, and journey to a far-away land they'd never heard of. God also promises Abraham to give him the land, saying, “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...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

When I read this passage again this week, I realized something. God does not say, if you do this crazy thing Abraham – if you pack up now and move far from your home – then, to pay you back, for your faithfulness I will bless you...and end it there. No, if you read the passage carefully, you realize this is not a tit for tat exchange. The blessing is not a reward for Abraham's obedience or faithfulness.

Instead God, says and in addition to showing you this land, I will also bless you so that you can be a blessing to others; so that by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Blessing Abraham is part of God's plan to bless all of creation.

So the promise of a blessing comes in addition to the promise of the land. God promises Abraham land AND a blessing even before Abraham ventures out. So Abraham is not blessed for his obedience. Abraham is not blessed because he is God's favorite child. No. The reason God blesses Abraham is so that he can be a blessing to others, so that by Abraham and his family, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

You and I, we are children of Abraham. So in the same way, you and I are not blessed by God as reward for our good works. We are also not blessed by God because God has a superior love for Christians, for Americans, or even for ourselves in particular. Many, however, will deny these Biblical truths. People want so badly to believe that they have what they have because they deserve it, they earned it, they worked for it. People want to believe they are entitled to shower all the resources they can possibly get upon themselves. As if we are entitled to our own greed because God blessed us with all this money, so obviously God wants us to have it!

Others want to believe they can control God's act of blessing, believing if they're just good enough, God will pay them back. Prosperity gospel preachers like Rick Warren will assure you this; preaching that if you are generous and faithful, God will bless you with material wealth. But my friends, that's a lie. If that were true, my boys in Ayacucho would have to be terrible sinners and I would have to be the most pious saint – and neither one of those things are even remotely true. What is true is that bad people often find themselves swimming in wealth, and innocent children are starving.

Many of us will ask, "Why God?" When we see the innocent suffer. But we forget to ask, "Why God?" When we are blessed. Could it be, perhaps, because we have come to feel entitled to the blessing? Or perhaps we don't really acknowledge the fact that we are really blessed, Blessed with a roof over our head, Blessed with food on our plate, Blessed to enjoy freedom, Blessed to have clothes on our backs, Blessed to be safe, Blessed to have a church home, Blessed to have family and friends, Blessed to have gas in our cars, Blessed to be warm, Blessed to be loved.

Whatever the reason, let us take the time to ask the question today. Why are we so blessed?

Friends, I am blessed – we are blessed – simply so that we can be a blessing to others, so that by us, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The guilt that I felt upon returning from Peru blessed no one. It certainly didn't bless me. And for years after that I gave so much of my time, talent and treasure to the wider world out of guilt. Guilt that I have two healthy children, an amazing husband, a cozy home, a fulfilling career, a full refrigerator, and the joy of living for Christ. It was as if all the blessings in my life were a yoke around my neck, weighing down my heart.

But in the same way that God didn't bless us to show God's special favor for us or to reward us for good deeds, God didn't bless us to make us feel guilty either. Certainly not! Then it wouldn't be a blessing but a curse.

Again, God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others – so that the whole world may be blessed.

And when you get that, when you really get that, something amazing happens: The blessing starts spreading like wildfire. Others pay it forward and you receive it back tenfold. It becomes this incredible joy to give because you see that by your little contributions of time, talent, and treasure, the whole world may be blessed.

I have to confess to you: I used to write my checks piously to my church family as a weighty obligation, in the back of my mind worrying whether God would continue to provide for us. But after years of this practice of giving, after prayerfully passing the plate over and over again, week after week, after all my prayers of thanksgiving, after practicing pledging, volunteering, giving, opening, letting go, gratitude and trusting God over and over again, now I'm really starting to get it. I am now able to joyously, imagining all the ways my money will start a chain reaction of blessing. Perhaps my contributions will fund the harpist who will come in and touch someone's heart so much on Christmas Eve, that they decide to give generously this year to the UCC Christmas Fund, which then is able to bless a retired pastor who didn't until have enough money to pay his medical debts, and so with his new freedom from debt, the retired pastor is finally able to fulfill his dream of visiting the Holy Land where he sends back a religious postcard to his divorced son, who then feels called to return to church, and then a few months later the son gets involved at his new church working in the food pantry...and the blessing goes on and on and on.

A blessing is something that is living and moving, passed on from person to person, so if we all bless each other out of our abundance, truly all the families on earth will be blessed. And your heart will understand; you'll get it. We are not compelled by guilt to share our blessings; we are so blessed to be a blessing.

So I ask you today my friends of Round Grove, where have you been abundantly blessed in your life? Have you always known a roof over your head, food on your table, gas in your car, clothes on your back, and love in your life? Close your eyes now, and take an inventory of your life. Look at your house, your closet, your pantry, your storage unit, your family, your bank accounts, your day planner, your heart. Are you blessed with

an abundance of warm clothes in your closet that could bless the poor? Are you blessed with an abundance of food in your pantry that could bless the hungry? Are you blessed with an abundance of love in your house that could bless the lonely? Are you blessed with time in retirement you could use to bless others through volunteering? Are you blessed with enough money for things like eating out, Christmas decorations, and watching movies that might be better used to bless your church family?

And once you do this careful inventory, and you dedicate all that you can to this great project of blessing, and then you see it catch fire and multiply across all families of the earth, the blessings in your life will go from being a burdensome yoke of guilt to like the yoke of Christ: something easy and light. Although you may have less “stuff,” your life will be more filled with joy and abundance than any American consumer dream could ever provide. And then you’ll get it. You know. We are truly blessed by God to be a blessing.

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