

# *Blessing the Way: Birth, Infinity, and Beyond*

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The church, as many an expectant parent will tell you, is a great place to have a baby. Where else can you be certain of a community that will welcome your child with baby showers, birth announcements in Sunday worship, a rose on the communion table, a cradle cross at the pulpit, pastoral visits to the hospital, a week or so of dinner deliveries, and then years of loving volunteers who will care for your growing baby during worship, hold her during the coffee hour, and provide as many surrogate grandparents and aunts and uncles and siblings as any family could possibly handle? Of course, the church will also formally baptize your child, a moment that moves many (including babies) to tears. But perhaps more moving are the dozens of informal rituals and practices that each congregation has for welcoming its youngest members. Many of these happen without the pastor's initiative or even knowledge; they are simply set in motion, time and again, whenever a new baby comes. In fact, I suspect—although I have no data to support this theory—that one of the church's most powerful lay ministries is the way a congregation marks the event of a birth or adoption. It can cement a new family's relationship with that community. When you have been fed, body and soul, by church folk who celebrate and honor your new arrival, you *know* what the realm of God looks like: you've had a taste. It looks like a warm casserole delivered to your door when you've been awake for twenty of the last twenty-four hours. It looks like a Bible Study (with childcare!) for parents on a Wednesday morning. It looks like an eighty-year-old woman who sews your baby a flannel nightgown, and then, a few years later (after observing you and this child fighting about vegetables at the church supper), gently suggests a better mealtime strategy. The church offers wisdom and love, and for parents, that is grace you can hold in your hand.

I experienced this firsthand when I was pregnant with my first child, thirteen years ago. At the time, my spouse and I were associate pastors (he at one church, I at another) in the Midwest, far from our families. Between us, we received no less than eight showers, and enough handmade baby quilts to launch a folk art exhibition. It was an astonishing outpouring of love, and it extended across every age group, from the teenagers to the ladies at the Presbyterian Home. By the time our son was born, we knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he had two church homes waiting for him, because the people of these congregations had told us so through the rituals they enacted for every new family. Those rituals told us, *There is room here for your child. This is his home and yours.*

When you are a new parent attempting to forge an entirely new concept of "home"—for that is only one of the radical identity shifts a baby brings—the church, in its ministry-to-new-families mode, can be a lifeline: it shows you, reminds you, what "home" can be. With baby showers and meal deliveries, knitted socks and nursery volunteers, the church provides new parents with an image of hospitality, of the openness and readiness and care that making-room and being-home for one another requires. This is a critical ministry at a critical time, and one that reaches far

deeper than a “family values” slogan. It’s a valuing of *this* new family. It’s a valuing of *these* new parents’ efforts to *become* a family.

This makes me think about other ministries the church might explore. To stock a larder and fill a layette for a new family, as they create a *home*, is surely an expression of Christian love. But there are other pre-birth concerns the church rarely talks about—perhaps because they aren’t so easy to address. Like *labor*. Like *becoming a mother*.

### ***Preparing for Laboring and Mothering/Fathering***

*How do I prepare for labor?* This is a huge question, to put it mildly, for pregnant women and their partners. Everyone knows that birth is a crucible experience, filled with more pain and risk than we can ever express. Yet apart from a few jokes, or the requisite telling of delivery room horror stories (a staple, it seems, at baby showers), women and men hardly ever share their deeper feelings about what the experience has meant to them—at least, not in the “mainstream” North American context.

Perhaps a residual squeamishness plagues us. Perhaps, as the location for childbirth has gradually moved out of the home and into the hospital, we think these are private matters between a woman and her doctor. Perhaps the rise of medicine has reduced our dependence on the spiritual community’s involvement in what used to be (and in many places, still is) the most dangerous event in a woman’s life. Today, when women who have access to medical care fully expect to survive and thrive after giving birth, it is easy to forget that four to five generations ago, a third of women died in labor. Preparing for childbirth became an intensely spiritual matter, both for the pregnant woman and her community of support. These days, however, preparation for childbirth usually consists of a few Lamaze classes and a briefing about what kinds of pain medication are available. Pregnant women no longer need to prepare to meet their Maker as they once did, and thank God for that. Yet labor still draws mightily on spiritual resources, and women want to ready themselves. Can the church play a role in this? How can the church help us to prepare *spiritually* for childbirth?

*How do I prepare to adopt child?* Adoption, too, is a crucible experience with its own set of concerns. Everyone knows that the process is an endurance marathon that draws on every emotional, physical, and even financial resource a prospective parent has. There are reams of bureaucracy. There are exorbitant fees. There are international and interracial questions that cut to the heart of the matter. There are grief issues and residual trauma, if the adoption follows a lengthy struggle with infertility. And the long periods of waiting, so characteristic of adoption, can just as perversely end with an abrupt phone call and zero adjustment time: ready or not, you are to become a parent . . . *tomorrow!* Any one of these stresses can be a considerable drain on the prospective parent(s) relationships; two or three can be overwhelming. Again: can the church play a role in the adoption process? How do we prepare *spiritually* for adopting a child?

*How do I prepare to become a mother . . . a father?* I recently spent some time with a friend who is about to give birth to her first child. This woman is an athlete who has completed several marathons. She has a healthy respect for what labor will require of her physically, as well as a healthy sense of her own strength and endurance; she knows, from experience, that her body can survive punishing levels of exertion. But beyond the delivery room, her ability to draw on parallel experience vanishes. She

wonders: can I really be a *mother*? Do I have what it takes? What kind of mother will I be? As eager and excited as she is to welcome her baby, she is also anxious about taking on her new role, and worried about the transition. So is her spouse. What they are feeling is perfectly normal, but that doesn't make it any easier for them to stand at the cusp of this great mystery. And as every couple eventually recognizes, the biology of birth does not in itself create a parent: one must live into these identities.

It's a tribute to my friend that she and her spouse are honestly wrestling with these issues. They do not, however, talk about it very much at church. Everyone expects them to be excited; no one has invited them to express other feelings of fear or anxiety about the enormous changes that are taking place in their lives. Now that I think about it, this strikes me as strange. Transition is an inevitable part of our humanness; times of change can be sacred opportunities. Why should we not look to the church to help us prepare *spiritually* for being and becoming parents?

### ***The "Blessing Way" Celebration***

Students, as any teacher will tell you, are a great way to keep learning. Begin following one train of thought, and the next thing you know, your students will have wrenched the track out from under your wheels. They don't mean to be difficult; they just can't help but *live*, right in front of us. And that usually changes the questions. It is also, in most cases, the wisdom we teachers needed most to see.

I am two times a mother, ten years a teacher, yet had not reflected much on any of the questions I've been exploring, here—until MaryAnn intervened. MaryAnn McKibben Dana was one of my students, and is now a pastor and a dear friend. Her senior year, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter. MaryAnn is the one who showed me what a powerful thing it is to prepare spiritually for birthing and mothering, by inviting me to her "Blessing Way." (And if you haven't already, I invite you to stop reading this article now, and to read her exquisite sermon in this issue; her reflection on her Blessing Way is prerequisite to all that I will say in the remaining space, here.)

The Blessing Way is a spiritual ceremony that has its roots in Navajo tradition. A pregnant woman near the time of labor gathers with her community of women, who celebrate with her this great transition in her life, and help her prepare herself spiritually for childbirth and mothering. A Blessing Way is not a time for baby blankets and knitted booties; it is a time to offer the pregnant woman gifts of wisdom and strength that she will need in the days ahead. These gifts come in the form of shared rituals. There is time for each woman, young and old, to share the wisdom she has learned from her experiences (either personal or vicarious) of childbirth. There is time for each woman to offer the pregnant woman the gift of a word ("grace," "joy," "reverence," "humor") to bless her birthing and mothering. There is time to create a special song that the mother can sing during labor, and then later, for her new baby. There is time to lay hands on the woman and pray. Each Blessing Way is different, but each holds in common the theme of deep spiritual preparation on the part of the woman and her community of friends. The community promises to pray for the woman during labor and beyond; the woman receives the love and care of the community as it blesses her way.

MaryAnn's Blessing Way was a revelation for me. It took place in her living room, which was filled with women of all ages. Some of these women were mothers;

some were not. Most were seminary friends. All had a special connection with MaryAnn. I was especially moved to note that three of the women—friends of MaryAnn from her home congregation in Texas—had traveled a great distance to attend this event. They knew: it was important. This was the time when MaryAnn needed them.

Two of the women—the Reverend Gini Norris-Lane, and the soon-to-be Reverend Elizabeth Cole Goodrich—designed the liturgy for the evening. You can read about it in MaryAnn’s sermon. What I would like to do now is to offer, by way of encouragement, six reasons why congregations might consider instituting a Blessing Way ministry for expectant mothers (and, I would argue, fathers!) in their congregations.

1. *A Blessing Way ministry reclaims the spiritual focus of birthing and parenting.* Bringing home a child is not primarily a medical or bureaucratic issue. It is a profoundly spiritual transition in the life of a parent and a family. It makes no difference whether that child is the firstborn or the eighth born; the entire balance of the home changes with the arrival of a new baby. Women and men need the support and attention of their faith communities at these times, and a Blessing Way marks the transition powerfully. This is not new wisdom; it is wisdom we have lost, in only a handful of generations. I believe the church can provide both the space and theological framework within which to reclaim that wisdom.

2. *A Blessing Way ministry displaces materialism.* When a family is expecting a new baby, so much of our focus goes to material things. Some of this is practical and even essential (hospitals will not even allow parents to take their infants home if they don’t have a car seat); some of it is just plain fun (those tiny sneakers! those frilly bonnets!). But preparing for a baby takes more than *stuff*; it takes the gifts of the spirit that no money can buy. The church is traditionally a place where people can regroup, refocus, reprioritize, repent. A Blessing Way turns our attention away from the material to the spiritual, and helps us to name those spiritual gifts so essential to laboring and parenting, to celebrate them, to share them. As MaryAnn’s sermon shows, the community’s enactment of the rituals can even call out gifts the expectant parent didn’t know she had.

3. *A Blessing Way ministry is an opportunity for intergenerational teaching and learning.* I was deeply impressed, at MaryAnn’s Blessing Way, by how the simple Blessing Way rituals reframed our thinking and talking together about birth. We weren’t trying to shock or amuse one another; we were trying to share strength, to speak the truth we knew. Women who had given birth were invited to reach down deep and describe what they had learned from labor. Women who had never given birth—many of them young women in their twenties—were invited to listen and learn in those intimate, holy spaces. It was intergenerational teaching and learning at its best, and I thought about how rare those opportunities are. I thought about what a difference it might make to a teenager to attend a Blessing Way for an older woman friend, and to listen to the women around her speaking of the spiritual gifts and demands of mothering. I thought about the connections that might develop between seventeen-year-olds and seventy-year-olds. I thought about how hard it is for women to reject cultural images of “perfect” bodies, and to see their *own* bodies as beautiful

and beloved of God, blessed with particular wisdom at every stage of the life cycle. So many women, young and old, are damaged and rendered mute by the way our culture objectifies women's bodies. Could the church be a place for fostering a different kind of imagining, a different kind of speaking?

4. *A Blessing Way ministry empowers laypeople.* A pastor is not an essential component of a Blessing Way ministry. In fact, the celebration flows best and is most meaningful when it is instigated and led by people who are close to the expectant mother; close friends have a sense of which rituals the mother-to-be will appreciate most, and which (foot massage?!) might make her uncomfortable. A Blessing Way ministry depends on flexibility in leadership and creative planning; each one will be as different as the woman it honors. This makes it a natural vehicle for drawing lay people—perhaps newer faces—into a congregation's life and ministry. In addition, because a Blessing Way traditionally takes place in the expectant mother's home—effectively creating a “house church” moment—the intimacy of the setting can be a powerful impetus for lay people to engage in a new kind of theological reflection and articulation. This is a ministry that can deepen a congregation's faith.

5. *A Blessing Way ministry models another way of doing ministry to women and men.* The traditional Blessing Way is an event for women. As I have noted, it speaks forcefully to the powers of materialism, sexism, and technology that suppress and isolate women in North American cultures. A Blessing Way is chance for women of every generation to gather and speak their own faith and truths to one another, learning from and supporting one another, even as they focus on one of their own. It is a celebration in which everyone gives and everyone receives. This kind of event seems a radical departure from most gender-specific ministries of the church, which often are sorted by age or interest or profession. And, as I have suggested earlier, the event holds enormous potential for men. Perhaps the men in a congregation could design a Blessing Way for one of their friends who is about to become a father. Teenage boys could learn from men their grandfather's age; fathers of toddlers and adolescents could share the wisdom they have learned and the wisdom they still seek. What an opportunity for the church to create rituals more lasting and deep than simply passing out cigars!

6. *A Blessing Way ministry urges us to rethink “family values” by looking within and beyond our own borders and definitions.* Finally, a Blessing Way ministry can be a catalyst for difficult but important conversations about families. We live in an era when the institution of the family no longer adheres to one “norm” (a married heterosexual couple of the same race, living with their own biological children), but is changing rapidly. A look around the pews can reveal many iterations of the word “family”: divorced single parents with children, married couples with adopted children, married couples with both biological children and adopted children of another race, homosexual couples with biological or adopted children, single parents with adopted children of another race, interracial couples, blended families, couples without children, single persons without children, widowed spouses . . . and the list goes on. A Blessing Way ministry calls certain questions in rather pointed ways: how do we, as a faith community, define “family”? Does our definition reflect our

membership? Does it elevate some families over others? How does our ministry with families embody what we believe a family is, does, and needs? What values are we teaching and promoting? And beyond our faith community, what are the particular challenges facing families in other neighborhoods, other cities, other cultures, other nations? How are we, as a church, “blessing their way”?

It’s amazing, actually, how attending just one Blessing Way can completely alter the way you think about those mother-to-be celebrations. I have a good friend who is expecting her first child in the spring. A year ago, I would have asked to give her a baby shower; the only thing I would have had to think about was *food*. Now, I’m thinking about *rituals*. I’m thinking about scripture passages, and prayers, and candles, and a circle of women, and scented oil (she likes foot massages), and all the beautiful rituals we could create for *her* Blessing Way!