

The Power of Approval

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Three days before Christmas, the intercom in my office buzzed. The secretary said, "There is a young man here who wants to see you....He says all he wants is for you to bless him." Well, I knew what that meant. He wanted money. They all do, especially at Christmas. Any excuse will do—anything to get in. That's the first rule in panhandling, get inside. But the Emergency Relief Office was closed for the day, so I said, "Sure. Show him in." He was not at all what I expected. He was nicely dressed, neatly shaved, late 20s, I suppose. There was an air of dignity about him, no glassy look in the eye, none of the usual signs of having been on the street, as we say. "Sorry to take your time," he apologized, "but I just want your blessing." He did not seem depressed or desperate; in fact, he appeared in pretty good spirits, very much in control, I thought, and I attempted to try to explain that theologically speaking, Presbyterians are not Catholics, and our preachers don't have the power to bless. But somehow that did not seem appropriate at the moment, certainly not what he had come for. "All I want is your blessing," he said.

Well, it was Christmas, and so, with some theological misgivings and some pastoral apprehension, I said, "Sure. What's your name?" "Andy," he said. And with that, Andy knelt down on the carpet in my study while I had a prayer, which was not so much a blessing (at least not in the usual sense), nor was it a pleading for God's blessing. Rather, it was a general kind of prayer of thanksgiving for God's promise to be present in Andy's life—in acknowledgment of the way God had already blessed him—in acknowledgment of God's concern for him, and God's purpose and future for him. When I said "amen," Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand, said "thanks," and left. Not a word about money—or a meal—or a bus ticket—or a place to stay. "All I want is your blessing," he said.

Now, you know, as I know, no one of us has any more power (or any less power, I might add) to bless than any other. Protestants believe in the priesthood of *all* believers, of course. Now it is true that Biblical tradition, often encouraged by superstition and opportunist preachers, has frequently promoted the notion that some are uniquely empowered to bless, but in our more sober moments of reflection, we do not really believe that, do we? Even St. Paul, listing for the Corinthian Church the catalog of gifts found within the body (some apostles, some teachers, some prophets), does not list the power to bless as being assigned to any particular group, ordained or otherwise. But if it is not within the power of a few to bless, can it not be, I wonder with you, can it not be within the power of all to bless? After all, the blessing is not ours to give—never has been in the Biblical tradition. It is God who blesses. Even in the Old Testament they understood that. (Aaron with arms outstretched to bless the children of Israel, Jacob, wrenching the coveted blessing from his half-blind father, Isaac.) They knew the blessing was God's alone to give. In the New Testament as well, Mary, whom all generations have risen up to call "blessed"—they all knew—as you and I know, the blessing is God's to give. We simply celebrate and pass on what is already given.

I heard of a woman elder in one of our Presbyterian churches who asked her pastor if he would bring the Session to her hospital room for a service of prayer and laying on of hands. (Now if you want to see a Presbyterian minister squirm, just make that kind of request.) Instinctively, the pastor stiffened, protesting, "I am a minister, not a magician. I don't have the power to heal." "Ah," she said, "that is not the point. I am dying. I know that. I know you cannot make me well. I am already well. I just want to celebrate that with those who believe it too."

Nobody here believes Jesus *needed* to be baptized, do we? But nobody here believes either, do we, that we *need* to be baptized. Baptism is not magic. Baptism is not miracle. Baptism is not blessing. Baptism is celebration. Now it is good, and proper, and important that we be baptized, but it never has been essential for salvation that one be baptized. Baptism doesn't do anything. Baptism celebrates what has already been done. Baptism claims a blessing that is already ours, even as our faith is our awakening (our celebration of the presence of God's grace that has been there all along).

There is a revealing scene in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The River." You remember it. The occasion is a country baptism with the little congregation all gathered at the bank of the river where this well-meaning couple have taken a neighbor boy named Bevel to be baptized. Bevel's parents are back at the apartment, both suffering from hangovers and glad to have the boy out of the house. So, in the story the preacher says,

"If I baptize you, you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ...do you want that, boy?" "Yes," the boy says. "You won't be the same again," the preacher says. "Then he turned his face to the people and began to preach and Bevel looked over his shoulder at the pieces of the white sun scattered in the river. Suddenly the preacher said, 'All right, I'm going to baptize you now.' And without warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism and then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child." . . . "You won't be the same again..." the preacher said.

Now one might be tempted to argue a bit over O'Connor's depiction of baptism, but that would be to miss the point. That would only lose the moment. The time to talk about the doctrine of baptism is in the classroom, not at the river, not standing before the font. You don't debate the resurrection at the funeral. You debate the resurrection in the library and the classroom and during long and worrisome sleepless nights, but you don't debate the resurrection at the funeral. At the funeral you celebrate the resurrection. So it is with the doctrine of baptism. Baptism, apart from all the theological implications of sin, forgiveness and new life—of initiation into the church—of commitment and promise—all of which are important (and never let it be said there is no place for that), but apart and beyond all that, the moment of baptism is that unique occasion when the human yearning for approval is ultimately answered.

"And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him, and lo a voice from heaven saying, 'this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" The lectionary has it, "This is my child, whom I approve."

Country preacher Clarence Jordan might translate it “This is my boy, and I am proud of him.” I ask you, is there any longing more universal than the craving of a child for the parents’ approval? How often have you heard, in discussion over coffee and at cocktail parties, “I somehow never seemed to please them...my mother always wanted me to be perfect, and I wasn’t...never once do I recall my father approving a thing I did.” I don’t know if Jesus *needed* to be baptized or not, but I do know if the Bible is right about Jesus being human in every way I am human, Jesus needed to know God’s approval. That is what we all need to know, isn’t it? At the deepest level of our being, we want approval, we want to be noticed, we want to count, we want to know even when we mess up, we are still loved.

And incidentally, I do not believe that deepest need can ever be answered by any casual “I’m OK, You’re OK, everything’s OK,” because everybody’s OK. When I’m at my worst, I do not find that very comforting. Bill Muehl is precisely correct when he asserts that the biggest concern religious people have today is not figuring out how to live the righteous life—not even the dreaded horror of breaking the commandments, of going to hell, or any of that. The bigger fear, in our time, is the deeper anxiety that no one—literally—gives a damn what we do. “The problem of our time,” says Professor Muehl, “is not an obsessive sense of the meaning of human existence, but a terrible dread, a deep anxiety, that the whole show is indeed an archaic charade.” And to tell people caught in that kind of circumstance (where nothing matters) that they are “OK” is to confirm the worst of their fears. After all, if there is no standard for morality, there is no sin. If there is no wrong, there is no forgiveness. If there is no judgment, there is no grace. If there is nothing to disapprove, there can be no approval.

“All I want is your blessing,” he said, standing in my office three days before Christmas. He did not stay long enough to say the precise character of the blessing he craved. Perhaps just as well. I sensed though, it was no superficial absolution from insignificant sin. I sensed it was no blanket endorsement of his current behavior. I sensed a young man was seeking some assurance that his life counted for something, and so he sought out the closest preacher to tell him again what he needed to know. In picking out one of God’s anonymous representatives for a blessing, I sensed the young man was mirroring the universal human need for God’s approval, or again, is that just my projection? I do know the biggest difficulty with God’s approval never has been with God, but with ourselves, which is why Tillich’s definition of faith rings so true. “Faith is our acceptance of God’s acceptance of us even though we know we are unacceptable.”

Well, let me tell you where that Christmas week experience has led me. It has led me to reconsideration of those ways in which we do indeed have it in our power to bless one another—not as magicians or dispensers of cheap grace, but as agents to one another—mirrors of God’s indispensable approval. There was once a picture on the cover of *Time* of the Pope sitting in a prison cell, knee to knee and eye to eye with his would-be assassin. The subheading said, “A pardon from the Pontiff, a lesson in forgiveness for a troubled world.” Now we are not popes—except as Luther suggested each is a pope to every other. Nevertheless, friends, we do have the power to bless, for there is power in approval. Indeed, is it not true that most of the pain in the world today stems from a need to be noticed—to count—to be taken seriously, and to share appropriately in the power? I know it sounds simplistic, but trace it back to its psychic origin, the war in Lebanon, the plight of the poor, upheaval in Central America, run-

away kids, school dropouts, the rise in crime, church squabbles, family tensions. All these are at their core a craving for recognition, to know that one counts. If we could just ever learn to hate the crime and love the criminal. If we could just ever learn to condemn the causes of poverty without condemning the poor. If we could ever learn ways of resolving differences with our enemies without having to defeat them. There is more power in approval than in condemnation. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." My God, what a blessing. What a blessing to mirror.

Sam Clark is a Methodist minister I once knew. One night, he saw an old man stumble and fall on the sidewalk. He stopped his car and ran over. The stranger seized Sam by the coat collar and said, "Edgar, you came." The next day Sam went to the hospital to check on him. The man, still semi-conscious, grabbed Sam's arm. "Edgar, I am sorry for what happened. Is it all right?" The wife whispered, "He had a son who left home twenty years ago, and he thinks it was his fault." Sam told me that for one of the few times in his life he felt as if he spoke with the authority of Jesus. He leaned close and said, "Yes, it is all right. You are forgiven."

There is power in approval, and if it is not the unique gift of some to bless, let us never forget it is the common gift of all to bless, to claim, to celebrate, and to share the blessing which God has already pronounced upon all people.