

Leading Causes of Life:
4) Fully Alive: Blessing
Genesis 12:1-3, Proverbs 11:24-26; I Peter 3:8-10
September 20, 2009

In his first book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum wrote about a unique form of logging trees practiced in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. “If a tree is too large to be felled with an ax, the natives cut it down by yelling at it. Woodsmen with special powers creep up on a tree just at dawn and suddenly scream at the top of their lungs. They continue this for thirty days. The tree dies and falls over. The theory is that the hollering kills the spirit of the tree. According to the villagers, it always works.”

Fulghum confesses, “I yell at my wife. And yell at the telephone and the lawn mower. And yell at the TV and the newspaper and my children. I’ve even been known to shake my fist and yell at the sky at times.

“Man next door yells at his car a lot. And this summer I heard him yell at a stepladder for most of an afternoon. We modern, urban, educated folks yell at traffic and umpires and bills and banks and machines—especially machines. Machines and relatives get most of the yelling.”

He concludes, “Don’t know what good it does. Machines and things just sit there. Even kicking doesn’t always help. As for people, well, the Solomon Islanders may have a point. Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts.....”ⁱ Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them.

Several events in the past two weeks have sparked a national conversation on civility. During President Obama’s address to a joint session of Congress, a Representative shouted, “You lie!” At the U.S. Open tennis player Serena Williams verbally threatened a line judge, exhibiting unsportsmanlike conduct. During the Video Music Awards, rapper Kanye West wrestled the microphone away from Taylor Swift to say that she did not deserve the award she had just won, someone else did. These incidents all took place in the public arena, but we know that similar events play out daily in private venues from the home, to the school yard, to the workplace, to emails and tweets, to the streets and freeways where we walk and drive. Our society seems to deem it acceptable to be rude and inconsiderate to others with whom we disagree or who get in our way or who rub us the wrong way. We find it acceptable to yell at living things in order to kill the spirit within them.

As we continue to ponder the leading causes of life, today we focus upon blessing. The previous three leading causes of life were connection, coherence or purpose, and agency or action. A fourth source of life is blessing. The book of Deuteronomy suggests that blessings are the opposite of curses. We have the freedom of choice, to choose life or death, to choose to bless or to curse. The

source of life, health and well-being is blessing. To curse is to pray that evil or harm come upon someone. To curse is to kill the spirit within living things.

The commission of people of faith for generations has been to be a blessing to others. This morning we heard Abraham's call by God to be a blessing to others. "I'll make you a great nation and bless you. I'll make you famous; you'll be a blessing....All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you."ⁱⁱ To bless is to give the power of life. God blesses Abraham with the gift of life. In turn, Abraham is to bless others with life.

We cannot bless ourselves. We can receive a blessing from God and others or we can give a blessing to God or others, but we cannot bless ourselves. Blessing is closely related to another leading cause of life, connection. In order to be blessed, we need connection with God and others. Blessing generates life, blessing gives birth, blessing creates. This is the human vocation: to be a blessing. With Abraham, God calls us to be a blessing to others, to give life, to enhance the lives of others.

Blessing is the direct opposite of cursing, which diminishes the life of others, which kills the spirit within another. The Latin origin of the word blessing is *bene dicte*, which means "good word." Our worship service ends with a benediction, a blessing, a good word to send us out into our torn and troubled world full of renewed hope, meaning, connection, and courage.ⁱⁱⁱ Offering a blessing to another person gives them hope to carry on. It says, "I acknowledge you. I validate your worth as a human being. I respect you. I wish you the best."

One definition of civility is "a benevolent awareness of others." When we attend to other people with care and respect, we are led to actions and words that are kind and considerate. We are able to transcend our own needs and desires and tend to the needs and desires of others.

Friday I heard an excellent presentation on civility on KQED's *Forum*. One of the guests was Dr. P.M. Forni, director of the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University. He noted that hospital Intensive Care Units that have a high degree of incivility among personnel also have a higher than average rate of mortality. The lack of communication among colleagues harms the lives of patients. In other words, if the ICU staff is uncivil toward one another, patients are more likely to die! If you hear the hospital staff arguing with one another, best to get up and find another hospital! There are dangerous consequences to our incivility. In biblical terms, cursing is deadly, blessing is life-giving.

Dr. Forni suggests that we need a healthy balance between self-esteem and self-restraint. Self-esteem is a good thing in good measure. It keeps us healthy. He refers to it as a sort of "immune system for the soul." The danger is that when we feed children too much self-esteem, we create children who are self-absorbed. They think the world revolves around them. They find it difficult to be considerate and kind. They are trapped in a cage of narcissism.

Another factor in our current wave of incivility is likely fear. If we are late and in a mad rush to get to work on time, we become afraid of losing our job. Fear creates anger. Anger creates hostility and incivility. We don't have the luxury of slowing down for the sole purpose of being kind to another. Our nation has experienced a year of economic stress and tension. People have lost retirement savings, college funds, jobs, homes. Stress often manifests itself in hostility. Dr. Forni suggests that insecurity is responsible for 50-60% of all acts of human rudeness.^{iv}

Think about it. When we are insecure, we are afraid. Our trust diminishes. We feel threatened by others who may be our competitors. Out of our insecurity we lash out at them, trying to pull them down and lift ourselves up. I've learned that most people who launch an attack on others are hurting within themselves. They have been wounded in some way and they are acting out of their brokenness. They tend to curse because they feel cursed. They can't bless others because they don't feel blessed. They are in need of blessing, of the gift of life, a good word of affirmation.

A common code of good manners helps us to act in ways that honor and respect one another. The word manner comes from the Latin word "hand." Manners have to do with how we handle one another. We exhibit good manners when we handle others with care and consideration. Good manners give our children training in altruism. For example, a parent says to a child, "You should chew with your mouth closed." The child asks, "Why?" The parent answers, "Because humans don't enjoy looking at half-chewed food in the mouths of others." Not only has the parent taught the child a table manner; she has also conveyed a basic principle upon which all ethical systems are based: our actions have consequences for others, and we should care about that. When we are civil, considerate, and kind, in essence we say to another person, "I notice that you exist. The fact that you exist matters to me. And I think your existence has value. You are worthy of my attention and respect, even if I disagree with your opinion."

People of faith have long known the importance of civility and good manners. We have called it by another name: blessing. With a good word, we seek to nurture the life within another, not kill their spirit. We bless one another by being polite and considerate. We bless another by paying attention to them, by listening to what they are saying and to what they are not saying. We bless another when we validate their worth as a human being. We bless another when we enhance their sense of security with a word of affirmation.

How have you been blessed in the past week? Who is hungering for a blessing from you? When will you offer them a blessing? What form will that blessing take? Everyone longs for a blessing. Everyone has the power to be a blessing to another.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of George. George had patented a part of a medical invention. The two met six months after he was diagnosed with

lung cancer. He sought therapy because he felt he had wasted his life. He was twice divorced and didn't really know any of his five children. He spent all his life working and making money.

Rachel knew that George's invention was part of a medical device that has enabled people whose chronic disease was previously unmanageable to live almost normally. Rachel knew Stephanie, someone whose life had been unmanageable before the invention of the device. Once she had access to the device, she began to lead a normal life. A meeting of George and Stephanie was arranged. It was more than a meeting. Stephanie invited George to dinner at her home where he was welcomed by her whole family, her husband, mother, three brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Her husband's parents were there, and many friends and neighbors –the whole community of people who had sustained her in the years she was an invalid. They spent over three hours telling George the story of Stephanie's life, the role each of them had played in it. At the end, Stephanie said, "This is really a story about you, George. We thought you needed to know."

When George shared the evening with Rachel, she asked, "How many of these things do you make every year, George?" "Close to ten thousand," he said softly. "I just knew the numbers, Rachel. I had no idea what they meant."^v George was blessed to be a blessing to Stephanie and countless others. Stephanie was blessed to be a blessing to George.

My friends, may the blessings you give and receive abound! The world is desperate for life-giving blessings!

ⁱ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten* (New York: Villard Books, 1988), pp. 19-20.

ⁱⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 11.

^{iv} "Bad Manners," *Forum*, KQED, www.kqed.org/radio/programs/forum/, September 18, 2009.

^v Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), pp. 225-228.