Numbers 6:24-26, Hebrews 13:20-21

"A blessing"

There is always a sense of something new when I get back to the pulpit after a week away. But there is also always a sense that when I have been gone you have been blessed by the Holy Spirit because of the person who has preached here in my place, whether it is Doug Friant or Michael or Jen, we are blessed with servants of the Lord who love Jesus and love to share the Gospel with you all. So a thank you to Doug for bringing the Word of God this past week.

One of the favorite things that the confirmation kids like to do in church is mimic your pastor when he is saying the benediction. You can't blame them, it is the last thing they hear before they go out into the world after church on Sunday, it is pretty much the same thing every Sunday: anyone who has been confirmed in this church while I have been here, do you want to have a go at it? Go out into the world in peace, return no one evil for evil, but love and serve God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and then something that relates to the sermon, now and forever. Right? It never changes except for that little line that points back to what we have just heard in the sermon.

That benediction, or that form of it, I thought, had a 67 year history up to now and every year we are adding another year. It was, I thought, the benediction that my father gave after his sermons, but for me it was a bit fuzzy, because by the time I came around he wasn't a pastor in a local church but rather a missionary in Portugal and in Italy and in Honduras and so he didn't preach every Sunday, he didn't have his own church. I knew it came, some of it, from Scripture and I knew it was from Romans 12:17-21, but I hadn't really done any kind of a deep dive into it, until this week.

What I discovered is that it comes from the book of common prayer that is shared with many Protestant denominations, and what my father said was probably a much longer version than what I remembered. Here is the whole, complete version from the book of common prayer: "Go forth into the world I peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Show love to every one and honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the blessing of the Almighty God, The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen." Yeah, there is no way that I could memorize all that, I

can't even memorize the words of institution for communion and I have to read them out of the Bible. So I guess I cut it down a bit.

But at the heart of every blessing, at the heart of every benediction, is a desire for peace, something we have often forgotten to pursue in our families, in our jobs, in our schools, in our civic societies, even in our churches at times. Today is our last Sunday in Hebrews and it appropriately ends with a desire, a wish, a command for peace that we all have to take to heart. Let's read.

READ

We find in Scripture quite a few places where blessings take place. Remember when Jacob steals the blessing from Esau and Isaac blesses him as the younger son. Also with Jacob, he was like the blessing hoarder, remember when he refused to let God go until he blessed him? Samuel blesses David when he is anointed king, Eli blesses Samuel when he is about to become the high priest, Moses blesses Joshua as he is about to take over for him. In the New Testament we see most of Paul's letters end with farewells that include blessings and requests for prayer so the concept of blessing someone or asking a blessing over a group of people is all throughout the Bible.

But probably the most famous of all the blessings, or the benedictions in the Bible, if you were keeping track, was the one that we read for our first Scripture. If this is new to you then the context is that Moses is given these words by God to pass on to his brother Aaron who has the priestly responsibilities. Moses was responsible for the civic duties of the Israelites, the laws, the punishments, the leadership, and Aaron was responsible for the religious life of the Israelites, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, which is why it was such a big deal when he built the golden calf because that was his area of responsibility and he really blew it.

Here, God gives Moses a blessing that he is to give to Aaron that Aaron is to pass on to his children so that they can bless the people of God as they make their way toward the promised land. This was a big deal because God blessing the people of Israel happened from generation to generation and it was passed down from parent to adult. Our baptism today, the giving out of our 2nd grade Bibles today is a manifestation of us fulfilling this blessing that was given from Moses to Aaron. It is a joining of that child into the covenant that God has established from Moses, to the better covenant that we have in Jesus Christ. It all comes together for us today in this worship service.

But at the heart of all these blessings is the repeated them of a desire for peace. Peace is always mentioned as the desired end result for the individual and for the collective body who receives that blessing. The same is true in the New Testament where God is described as a God of peace, and that has to be central in our interactions with others as we bless them, that we would bless them with the understanding that we want peace for them and those who are around them. I have a whole list of Scriptures that point to the presence of peace and God being described as a God of peace in these blessings. Romans 16:20 we read that the God of peace will crush Satan, I Corinthians 14:33 where we read that God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace, II Corinthians 13:11 where Paul tells us to live in peace and love and the God of love and peace be with you. Philippians 4:9 Paul asks that the God of peace be with us. I Thessalonians 5:23 Paul again uses the phrase the God of peace. There are others, but you get the point.

In every blessing in Scripture, in every benediction, in every wish for our future is the desire to see peace present and thrive and be at the center of our lives. How present is peace in your life? That's a serious question. If we are following the wishes and the desires of God then peace ought to be prevalent in our lives even in the most confusing and difficult times.

While this final blessing that we receive in Hebrews begins with peace in vs.20, it pretty much covers all that we have seen in this sermon to the Hebrews. Remember, this is not a letter written to a community which was to be read with greetings and farewells but a sermon to be preached with exhortation and theology which must be taken to heart. In this benediction we see all those things that the author has covered and that we have looked at. The parabola of faith where from the beginning, the God of creation chose to be one of us and lived and died and was resurrected and as we read in vs.21 was raised to glory to sit at the right hand of God the Father almighty. The parabola of faith is repeated.

We read about the dangers of apostasy, or stepping away from the faith thinking that we can live this life on our own after we have been in the body of Christ and then we step away, there is nothing more damaging to our relationship with Jesus than thinking that we can step away from the community and not be impacted in our faith. As Revelation states hot or cold, not lukewarm and apostasy is a reflection of luke warmness. We read in this benediction Jesus is the center of the better covenant through is blood and death and resurrection. All of these things we read and we are reminded that we are a part of a body that loves to serve and loves to worship and loves to be a part of the kingdom of God.

This blessing that we have in Hebrews gives us a picture of our future together as one that we can be made complete which allows us to do his will. What drives the most people away from the church is a hypocrisy where we might see ourselves as better than others. There is nothing more dangerous and more false than this thought. Anytime we try to make ourselves great God will come and remind us that no one is great except God himself. In this blessing the thought is that we would be made complete in Jesus, not perfect. Or as Colossians 1:28 that we would be presented before God as mature in Christ. That is our wish and our desire and this benediction reminds us that a manifestation of that maturity is peace. Are we at peace with ourselves, are we at peace with others, are we at peace with our family. Right now we live in a very, very immature nation because we are not at peace, either with ourselves or with the world.

But we are also reminded that human effort can never be independent of God. No matter how hard we try to be at peace, if God is not a part of the picture, then we will never be at peace. Maybe that is part of our problem right now. We are trying to be at peace without God in our families, in our personal relationships.

This sermon ends with the only appropriate way that a sermon should end. A single word that means So be it, let it be so. Amen, let God's will be done, Amen and Amen.