## Sermon Series: Life in Christ: Chosen, Blessed, Broken, and Given Sermon Title: Blessed John 14:15-21; Acts 2:1-2; Psalm 29 Salem United Methodist Church; May 15, 2016 Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

If we were asked in a survey, what our religious affiliation is, most, if not all of us, would say Christian. But if we were asked what Life in Christ is, some if not most of us, might mumble or stumble over the words. What does it mean to have a Life in Christ? Last week we looked at the first part of having a Life in Christ, being chosen. We discovered that each person as a creation of God is chosen. Being chosen is not about elitism or exclusion that is, some are chosen while others are rejected. Being chosen means Christ sees each person as being precious and having unique God-given qualities. Today we will look at another aspect of Life in Christ, blessed.

What do you think of when you hear the words, 'blessed, bless, and blessings?' We may think of the phrase, "God Bless America" as in the song or stated in political speeches. Or we may think of the phrase, "bless you," after someone sneezes. According to Wikipedia, the origin of this dates back to 77AD. During this time it was believed that sneezing could cause one's soul to leave one's body making way for the devil to enter. Then in 570 AD Pope Gregory I ordered people to say, "God bless you," after someone sneezed to ward off the plaque. Did you know that? Another time in which blessings is mentioned is around Thanksgiving when we talk about counting our blessings, naming them one by one, so we can thank God for our blessings. Recently I discovered a new phenomenon using the word, blessed. Sometime ago the phrase, "Have a good day," became a popular phrase frequently used by cashiers or wait staff when they have finished a transaction with a customer or sometimes we use this phrase to say, "Good-bye." For the person who says it hundreds of times a day, the phrase becomes muddled and lacks meaning. Recently, I've began to hear another phrase when someone ends a transaction, "Have a blessed day." The first time a cashier said that to me, my ears perked up and I said back to her, "You have a blessed day, too." The word, 'blessed,' is not often used outside of religious circles. So when I was told to have a blessed day, I felt like we were speaking in a code that communicated to each other that we were Christians. In our pluralistic world where the numbers of people who claim to be non-believers are growing, saying "Have a blessed day," reminds me of the early Christians who were threatened by persecution. They sought out other Christians by drawing a fish in the sand. So after being told to have a blessed day, I asked myself, as a Christian and an ordained leader of the church, why am I not offering this to blessing others? Who knows what kind of conversations may begin by offering this verbal blessing, "Have a blessed day," in a meaningful way?

The Hebrew word for "bless" is *berakah*. It means benefit, a generous gift, to offer large provisions or favor. Another definition is every good and perfect gift from God. In the Bible God extends the benefits or blessings and we are the recipients. The giving and receiving of blessings are benefits of the covenant relationship between God and humanity. God blesses us and we receive God's blessings. God blesses over and over again. The word, 'bless' is used 591 times in the Bible; the word, 'blessed,' 313 times, and 'blessing,' 130 times. In total, these words are used over 1000 times. They are central to our faith. Their first use is in Genesis 1:22. After God created the animals, God blessed them by telling them to be fruitful and multiply. When God created humans, God blessed us. Abraham and his descendants are blessed by God as God reiterates the covenant to each generation. Another example is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He used the phrase, 'blessed are'' as nine groups of people who are hurting or disenfranchised from society are listed. Each are to receive a special generous benefit from God: the poor will receive the kingdom of heaven, those that mourn, comfort; the meek will inherit the earth, the hungry and thirsty will be filled, those who offer mercy will receive more mercy, those who are pure in heart will see God, peacemakers will be called children of God; the persecuted will receive the kingdom of heaven. Jesus also instructs us to bless those who curse us as a way to love our enemies. Does this mean that we are to extend our benefits or give generously to those we do not like or even hate? It certainly does! Challenging? Yes, but what happens when we give generously to someone we don't like? Most times the relationship changes.

The Bible also tells us to bless God. This is often found in the Psalms as in Psalm 29. The entire Psalm is a blessing to God except the last verse in which we ask for God to bless us. Why are we to bless God? Does God need blessings? No, but we are to bless God as a way to remind ourselves that God is the source of all our blessings. Perhaps as a nation rather than asking for God's blessings, we should sing, America, Bless God? Perhaps our political climate would change if we could recognize that we do not earn our blessings, and we are not to keep them for our own benefit. We are to bless God, recognize God as holy who calls us to be holy.

For ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven the disciples gathered in one place to bless God. The result- they received a very special blessing. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at the holy moment when the apostles were blessed of the Holy Spirit. Wow! The moment was so amazing, so holy that they struggled to find language to describe it. So they said it was like a wind blowing through the closed room, or like fire appearing on our heads. These are strange descriptions. When was the last time any of us saw fire dancing on someone's head? Jesus promised that God would send the Holy Spirit and whoosh! It happened! The disciples who were chosen by Jesus are now called apostles who have been blessed by the Holy Spirit. Why the change in language? The word, disciple, means learner or follower. They learned from Jesus and followed him. The word, apostle, means sent. After they received the blessing of the Holy Spirit, they are sent as a messenger to tell others about Jesus. What did they need to do accomplish this task? They needed

to speak different languages to the different cultures of Jews who gathered in Jerusalem to bring the first fruits of the spring as an offering for the Pentecost Festival. Who was blessed by the Holy Spirit? Not just the traditional twelve disciples, but everyone who gathered in one place: men, women, old, and young. There was no discrimination. God blessed them all with the Holy Spirit so they could bless others. They did not stay in the room and pat each other on the back for a job well done. No, they went outside the walls and shared what they had been given. Thousands were blessed by the apostles whom the Holy Spirit had blessed. The apostles were blessed to be a blessing. They offered the blessing of the Good News of Jesus to all who would listen.

"Offering a blessing" is not part of our vernacular, but it should be. To both receive and offer blessings is part of our purpose. This is how we have life in Christ. We are to both receive and offer blessings. But what do we tend to do instead? We complain about others. We blame and curse them to their face and/or behind their backs. We victimize them and ourselves. Our worldly way of life creates fear, anxiousness, and insecurity. Our worldly way of life steals our blessings from us, tears us down, and makes us feel insignificant. We say to others and hear in our minds those cursed words of being worthless, useless, and no good. Now what happens when we begin to say good things about someone to someone? We begin to see them in a different light, right? However, a blessing is more than good words or words of appreciation. Blessing another acknowledges the chosenness in another. Blessing another is recognizing that the other is precious in God's eyes. Blessing another is honoring the other's unique God-given qualities. Chosenness and blessedness go hand in hand. Our Jewish neighbors know how to offer blessings. Have you ever been to a bar or a bat mitzvah? These are beautiful ceremonies in which the child entering into adulthood is blessed by his or her family. Can you imagine how meaningful it must be for a 12 or 13 year old to have a parent or both parents tell them publicly how special they are? Parents, have you ever laid hands on your children, looked them in the eye, and told them that you love them just the way they are? Have you ever blessed them? Have you ever prayed with your child asking for God to bless them? Your children need to hear this. We all do. We all need acknowledgement of our chosenness. We all need to receive blessings from each other.

In Latin, the word, 'to bless,' is *benedicere*. It literally means, "well (bene) speaking (dictio)" or saying good things. The term, benediction, comes from this word. A good word is given at the end of worship to send us on our way into the world. One of the reasons we gather together every week is to affirm our faith in God and share our faith with each other. We come to both receive and give blessings from God; and to give and receive blessings from each other. There are three ways that we can both offer and receive blessings with our presence, our prayers, and our gifts. We receive blessings when we gather each week. Being present in worship is being open to receiving a blessing. We pray each Sunday for God to open our eyes, ears, and heart so we can receive God's blessings. Another way of being present is being aware of, or attentive to the blessings God has for you every moment of every day. Being ready to receive is a way to be present with God. Each Sunday we share how God has blessed us during the week. How attentive are we? What blessings do we miss? Henry Nouwen wrote that "the problem with modern living is that we are too busy to notice that we are blessed." Another way in which we can be present to receive blessings is not to brush off the affirmations or blessings others offer us. We tend to say, "Oh, no bother, or it wasn't any trouble," as an attempt at being humble. When in reality, we struggle to receive the blessing another has to offer.

The second way to offer and receive blessings is in prayer. We can offer blessings in our prayers of petitions, but to receive blessings from God, we need to sit silently, waiting for the Holy Spirit. Henri Nouwen also wrote that "the real 'work' of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about you." So turn off the negativity that bombards us with all media. Find ways in your overly scheduled life to sit in silence and listen for God's affirmation for you, to hear with the ears of your heart that you are chosen and blessed by God.

The third way to both give and receive blessings is through our offerings. This does include our weekly giving in the offering plate. God has blessed us with the ability to work and have a home. God asks us to bless God with an offering. Each week when we give our offerings we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." "It is in giving that we receive," St. Francis is to have said. It is in giving that we acknowledge our blessedness and receive more blessings.

We are blessed, but we have the choice to accept or reject our blessedness. If we reject our blessedness and not claim our God-given blessings, we will exist in the darkness of cursedness. Much of our entertainment celebrates cursedness, and not blessings. Politics has become a game of cursing rather than seeking the greater good and offering blessings. What other ways do people exist in cursedness? If we accept our blessedness, then we will receive a desire to be a blessing to others.

Our congregation is blessed and we are a blessing. We honor each other even if we believe in God differently. We honor each other even if we have different opinions, or political views. This doesn't happen in every place. We are a congregation that recognizes the chosenness in each other and in so doing, we are willing to not only receive God's blessings, but we can be a blessing to others.

There are two sentences I want to offer you. Life in Christ is an ever blessed one. Life in Christ is ever to be a blessing.

**Reflection Questions:** How do you receive God's blessings in your life? And what do you do with them? **Resources:** *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen