

Sermon for Sunday, January 29, 2023
Reconciling in Christ Sunday - Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
“Original Blessing”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Good Shepherd member and seminarian Kathryn Thompson, her wife Sara Hanssen, and their daughter Greta have richly blessed this congregation in so many ways. One blessing Kathryn has given is something that I get to experience every Wednesday night. Each Confirmation class ends with a blessing circle, a practice I learned from Kathryn, a practice she learned from former Good Shepherd member and now Pastor Amalia Vagts.

At the end of each Confirmation class, the students, our Youth Director Kelli, and I stand in the blessing circle. One person at a time goes into the center of the circle. All the rest of us take turns blessing the one in the middle. We call them by name and say, “You are God’s beloved child.” So, when I stand in the middle of the circle, I get to hear the words “Pastor Amy, you are God’s beloved child” spoken to me up to nine times a night.

This practice is awkward and a little time consuming and sometimes I think, should we really do this every week? And then I stand in the middle and I’m blessed deep in my bones. I feel this good news: that I am loved by God, that God is with me, that God sees me and regards me with delight even when I’m tired, even when I’m feeling down, even if the Confirmation lesson didn’t go as well as I’d hoped. I hear this good news from middle school youth who are steeped in our culture’s toxic messages about themselves, about other people.

I love hearing this. I love getting to remind our beloved youth of how they really are. It is one way we live out the words we say at each baptism here at Good Shepherd. We say, *The world will call you many things. The world will try to rename you. Today we echo the voice of the Triune God. Today we call you beloved of God. When we see you begin to wonder if this name is really yours, we promise to remind you: You are indeed God’s beloved child.*

I love this blessing circle. Wonderful Kelli, our Youth Director, loves it too. Kelli has now developed a secular version of this practice for her special education classroom. She does a “you matter” circle with her students. I also love that this practice came from Kathryn and from Amalia. They, and so many LGBTQIA+ Christians are helping the

larger church to remember our blessedness, to know that we are all created good, all created in the image of God, that God does not make mistakes.

For so long, the church has tried to shame people into believing, into being what the church defines as “pure”, into being meek and humble. For so long, the church has emphasized original sin rather than what authors Matthew Fox and Danielle Shroyer name as original blessing. Original blessing is what is most true for each one of us, what is proclaimed in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible: God creates us, gazes upon us, and declares us very good.

God views each one of us as God’s beloved child always and forever. Nothing about us ever changes that. Even when we hate and judge, even when we are stuck in prejudice and bias and fear of others, even when we struggle to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, God cannot be stopped from loving us.

Take what God does through the prophet Micah for instance, what we heard about in our first reading today. God has been hurt by Israel’s hard heartedness. God is frustrated and in pain. Yet still, God responds by reminding Israel of the ways God has saved them throughout their history, reminding Israel of God’s love and faithfulness. These saving acts, this love of God, is what makes it possible for Israel to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

It is God’s blessing, not shame and blame, that allows us to live in God’s loving ways. And oh, does God shower us with blessing in every time and place, in all circumstances, and especially in times of sorrow and pain. That word blessing has been hijacked in our culture. We proclaim we are blessed when we share pictures of smiling families, as we drive new cars away from the lot, when that promotion finally comes through.

Yet to be blessed by God means to be seen, honored, regarded, cherished by God. And God’s blessing doesn’t bring us health and wealth, but rather well-being, peace and joy, no matter the circumstances we face. God’s blessing makes it possible for us to be a blessing: to show mercy, to make peace, to hunger and thirst and work for justice and righteousness.

This is what Kathryn, Sara, Amalia, Jonathon, and other LGBTQIA+ Christians show the church time and again. They each have experienced the failings and sin of the church that tried to separate them from God and God’s people. Yet, the love and blessing of God is stronger than the human tendency of separation. God’s love still gets through to these beloved LGBTQIA+ children of God, despite the failings of the church. Now, in their own ways, these children of God are working to help others experience good news and blessing. Thanks be to God.

Beloved of God, you are blessed by God.
God sees you, honors you, cherishes you, delights in you.
Soak up this good news today. Bask in it.

You are blessed. You are a blessing to the world.
Go and help others to know that they are blessed and loved.