

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Original Blessing

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Well, welcome to all seven of our campuses, shout out to our extended family online. This weekend we kick off a new series based on a book. Looks a little something like this and excited book releases next Tuesday, but we got our hands on some black market copies. And so you can grab one at all of our campuses on the way out. It's a gift from Lora and I and I might mention just what a privilege we count it to serve this church to serve you. And I might mention that the book is dedicated to you and so I'm going to put this on the screen; "To those who have generously invested their time, talent, and treasure in National Community Church. Once a shareholder, always a shareholder." So here's to you, which you give it up for yourselves. [clapping]

And here we go if you have a Bible, you can turn all the way back to the book of Genesis and we'll meet there in a minute. In Greek mythology, there is a legend about a labyrinth that was inescapable. Those who entered never exited for within that maze meandered a minotaur, a fearsome creature that was half man, half bull. Every nine years, the evil King of Crete demanded that the Athenian send seven boys and seven girls to be sacrificed to the minotaur. As you might imagine, the Athenians did not take to this tradition well. On the occasion of the third minotaur games. Theseus the Prince of Athens volunteered himself as tribute. When Theseus landed on Crete, the daughter of the Cretin King, Princess Ariadne fell head over ancient heels in love with Theseus. She knew, however, that no one who had ever ventured into the labyrinth had ever found their way out. So she devised a rather ingenious plan. Ariadne gave Theseus a sword with which to slay the minotaur and more importantly a ball of thread. Theseus tied one end to the entrance then he unwound that ball of thread as he meander through that maze. After slaying the minotaur with the sword, Theseus moon walked his way out of that labyrinth. Hold that thought.

Life is a labyrinth. It's full of relational twists and occupational turns that we did not see coming. We zig through big decisions. We zag through bad decisions. There are situations we get ourselves into that we do not know how to get ourselves out of and we all encounter some minotaurs along the way. Some of you may work for one; half man, half bull, right? I think weaving our way through difficult seasons of life, it can feel like we are lost in a labyrinth and I think addiction feels this way. I think depression feels this way. I think grief feels this way. But I want you to know this weekend there's a way out. There is a ball of thread but we've got to go all the way back to the beginning to find our way forward.

What I want to do this weekend is a little bit of reverse engineering. Genesis chapter one verse 26, I'll put it on the screen. *"Then God said, let us make man in our likeness, in our image."* Now I want you to notice the plural pronoun; Let us make man in our image. This is collaboration between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them."* There is a double emphasis on the image of God because this is double trouble. If we don't understand whose image we are created

in. We have a core value at National Community Church that you are invaluable and irreplaceable. It traces all the way back to this ancient truth, to this fundamental fact that you are the image of Almighty God.

Now, I know that there are people that you do not like, or is that just me? How do you love people you don't like? And it's usually the people who don't look like us, who don't think like us. We live in a divisive culture. We live in a divisive city. How do we bridge that gap? How do we love people who aren't like us? I think it starts right here. It's recognizing we may not like them, but they are made in the likeness of God himself. This goes so far beyond political affiliation or racial identity or socioeconomic status. You are the image of God.

In "The Weight of Glory" CS Lewis said this, there are no ordinary people. He said, you have never talked to a mere mortal. He said, the dullest, most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship. And I love this comparison point because we'll celebrate communion at all of our campuses this weekend. He said next to the blessing sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

All right, verse 28; we're only 28 verses into act one, we're still at the hospital, in fact, we're in the delivery room. The umbilical cord hasn't even been cut. And what does God do? What is the very first thing that God does? I'll put it on the screen. "*Then God blessed them...*" and I'm going to stop mid sentence and talk about it. I want you to hear what I'm about to say. Before original sin, there was original blessing. That sequence is so significant because if we get the sequence wrong, the entire algorithm is off. Why? Because it changes who we see when we look in the mirror because it alters the way that we relate to God. If we doubt original blessing, we second guessed the goodness of God and we relate to God for all the wrong reasons.

Let me interrupt this sermon and talk a little bit about writing. When I write a book, I kinda liken it to hiking into a huge forest, vast, dense, and I call it the writing forest. And so you start writing a chapter and you have a general idea of where you want to go and what you want to say. But you get into the writing forest and you get lost and you don't know how to find your way back out. And so that's why in recent books I started writing shorter chapters. Kid you not, easier to get in and get out, but it's also a little Jedi mind trick. I've learned that the shorter the chapter, the better people think they are as readers. When I wandered into the Double Blessing forest I thought this was a book about the art and science of gratitude and generosity, and it is. I thought it was about flipping the blessing as a way of life, and it is. But let's not miss the forest for the trees. This is a book; this is a series about rediscovering God's heart for you.

Blessing is God's most ancient instinct. Blessing is God's first and foremost reflex. Blessing is God's default setting. Now, God won't bless disobedience. God's not gonna bless pride or greed or laziness; he loves us too much to do that. We've got to position ourselves for blessing and we'll talk about some habits of highly blessed people, but here's the big idea. God wants to bless you beyond your ability to ask or imagine. God wants to bless you in categories you can't even conceive of. That's what I'm believing for you. I'm believing this begins a new season of blessings. So let me get theological, then we'll get practical and I think those are the same thing. Okay, spirituality is practicality.

In the second century, A D a church father by the name of Irenaeus was a key player in resisting heresy in defining orthodoxy. Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyons, but he was originally from Smyrna, one of the seven churches that is written to in the book of Revelation. Now, the Bishop of Smyrna was a man by the name of Polycarp and I've talked about him in some books and in some sermons. Polycarp was known as the 12th martyr. When Polycarp was dragged into the Roman Coliseum and told to recant his faith, he said this, 86 years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my savior? Then Polycarp according to ear witnesses heard of voice from heaven that said, 'be strong, Polycarp play the man.'

Here's the rest of the story. According to church tradition, Polycarp was disciplined by the Apostle John himself, and just as John disciplined Polycarp, Irenaeus is believed to have been disciplined by his pastor, Polycarp. So, Irenaeus was disciplined by someone who was disciplined by someone who was disciplined by Jesus. He is a third generation follower of Christ. I don't think you need to know that historical context, but I think it adds some weight. It was Irenaeus who was the first to allude to this idea of original sin. Now, Augustine in the fourth century expounded on this idea, but he made it much less optimistic and far more deterministic. And then the Protestant reformers, Martin Luther, John Calvin among them, picked up this idea of original sin, took it to the nth degree, and I think that's when original sin overshadowed original blessing. But please hear me, I don't doubt original sin, I have children. But listen to me, children need to know that their blessings first and sinner second, and so do you. If we see ourselves as sinners first and blessing second, I think it creates all kinds of identity issues. I don't doubt the sin nature, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but sin is secondary, blessing is primary.

Now why am I making such a big deal about original blessing? Well, in Aristotelian philosophy, there's something called a first principle. It's a basic assumption. It's a foundational truth. Aristotle said, a first principle is the first basis from which a thing is known. So I want you to know first and foremost that you are blessed by God and I'll take it one step further, you are blessed to bless.

Let me double back to the beginning. You've got to tie one end of Ariadne's thread to original blessing. Blessing is God's most ancient instinct and that means that blessing is our earliest memory as a human race. This week I spoke at the American Association of Christian Counselors in Nashville. It made me think of one of the best in the business, a man by the name of Alfred Adler. His signature move with new clients was a quintessential question, and you've heard me share this before. He would ask his new clients, what is your earliest memory? Now, no matter how the patient replied, Adler would say, 'and so life is.' Adler believed that our earliest memories leave a profound imprint on the soul and I think he's right. Now, imagine Adler asking Adam that question; lots of unforgettable moments and memories from roaming the garden to naming the animals to rib surgery, but none of those represent his earliest memory. Adam says to Adler, my first memory is being blessed by God. Blessing sets the tone. Blessing sets the table. Blessing establishes the emotional baseline and spiritual trend line of Adam's entire existence. Yes, sin enters the equation. Dysfunction, pain, imperfection come into play, but none of that changes the fact that we are the image of all mighty God and that we are blessed by God himself.

Okay, stick with me. Blessing is our earliest memory and that's why I believe blessing is our deepest longing. There is a longing within each one of us to be blessed, to be celebrated for who we are, to be accepted for who we're not, to be loved with no agenda, no strings attached, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. You are loved as is. Did you hear me? This is not based on anything you've done or not done, you are loved because of who you are, but more important because of whose you are, you are the image of God. You are God's workmanship. You are the apple of God's eye.

I've met people who have accomplished so much. They've done more, made more, experienced more than I could probably imagine in several lifetimes, people who are so gifted, so successful, and yet some of them so insecure and so lonely. In fact, I think that they would trade everything they've accomplished for their mother's love or their father's pride. They never got a blessing and it leaves a gap, and this instinct is as old as Esau, Jacob steals the birthright, steals the blessing. It's one of the saddest scenes in scripture. You have to almost read it with a quivering voice because Esau says, have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, even also. Oh my father and Esau could not control his voice and wept aloud.

What happens when you don't live from a place of original blessing? I think verse 41 happens. Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him. So many of our emotional issues, our greed, our lust, our anger, our pride, our jealousy they come from this place of woundedness, this place of emptiness and it's something that only God's blessing can heal, that only God's blessing can make whole. Your family of origin may have felt like more of a curse than a blessing. Sometimes that makes it really hard to believe that blessing is God's most ancient instinct.

Let me make it personal. I can't not love my kids. It doesn't depend on the day of the week. It doesn't depend on how they're doing. It's not contingent upon their accomplishments. It's not compromised by the mistakes they make. There is nothing that can change my default setting as an earthly father. I can't not love my kids. When our kids were very young, single digits we were vacationing in Deep Creek, Maryland, and we're staying at this house in the woods and it was a little scary at night. Okay, a lot scary at night, pitch black. So one night we're in the hot tub on the back porch and I'm having one of those moments that sometimes as parents you have where you are just so overwhelmed with how much you love your children. And I turned to my kids and I said, kids, if a bear came out of these woods, I would die for you. Things not to say to young children. Our kids jumped out of the hot tub, ran into the house screaming where Lora comforted them, thankfully. I can't not love my kids.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul said it this way. *"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."* In his letter to the Corinthians, he said, *"these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest, these is love"*. Love is the first principle. Love is the default setting. Love is our fallback position.

Let me take a minute, talk about what blessing is, what blessing is not then we'll land this plane. If you're taking notes; Number one, blessing is not good luck. It is not winning the lottery. In the

words of the notorious BIG, "mo, money, (congregation responded 'mo problems). Thank you. God doesn't bless us to raise our standard of living; God blesses us to raise our standard of giving. If all we do is raise our standard of living, the blessing backfires and becomes a curse. Your greatest asset becomes your greatest liability if you don't use it for God's glory. That's the lesson of the rich young ruler.

Two, blessing is not health, wealth and prosperity. Now those things can be a byproduct of God's blessing, but we devalue the blessing of God when we think of it in material terms. It's not an exotic vacation with hashtag blessed beneath the picture. It is not a hashtag blessed bumper sticker on an expensive car. The blessing of God is things you can't put a price tag on. It's joy unspeakable. It's peace that passes understanding. It's knowing that your past mistakes do not define you because your sin is forgiven and forgotten. It's not knowing what the future holds. It's knowing who holds the future and the fact that he is preparing good works in advance for us. So let me jump the gun and tell you what the blessing is. The blessing is right relationship with the One in whose image we are created. It is God with us. It is God for us. It is God in us.

I'll add one more to the mix. Number three, blessing is not zero gravity. In other words, blessing is not no problems, that's impossible. Jesus said in this world, you will have trouble. Now gratefully it doesn't end there, right? Take heart, I have overcome the world. But everyone walks through the valley of the shadow of death. You will grieve. You will get hurt. In fact, the more you love, the more it hurts. Life is not fair, but God is good and his grace is sufficient.

Carl Young made a striking observation about how people are and are not healed. I want you to dial in right here. He said, all the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. Well, that's depressing, but he doesn't stop there. Carl Young says this about our problems. He says they can never be solved, they can only be outgrown. That is so true and it's so hard and so true. The circumstances, you want God to change maybe the very circumstances that God is using to change you. And what you perceived to be a curse, I don't think we know enough to make that evaluation up front 'cause sometimes it's a blessing in disguise. Sometimes it's the catalyst for spiritual and emotional and relational growth. I mean what makes us think that we can become like Jesus without being betrayed by Judas or denied by Peter or tempted by the enemy himself. This is not an immunity card. Sometimes you have to hit bottom in order to bounce.

I'll make one last observation. The blessings of God will complicate your life. Now listen, sin will complicate your life in a way that it should not be complicated, but the blessings of God will complicate your life in a way that it should be complicated. The reward in the parable of the talents is not an early retirement or extra vacation time. The reward for good work is mo' work, right? Let me complicate. Well done, good and faithful servant, let me complicate your life.

When Lora and I got married, it complicated her life. Listen, praise God for 27 years of complications. We have three complications, we named them Parker, Summer and Josiah, I can't imagine my life without those complications. When we made the decision to go multisite as a church, it complicated our org chart. When I started writing books, it complicated my calendar. But I dare say that those complications have been the catalyst for growth in my life. You know why? You need to build relationship with someone who is not like you because it will complicate

your life and that's how you grow. You know why you need to go on a mission trip? Because it will complicate your calendar, it will complicate your budget, but that's how we grow. Why do you need to plug into a small group or plug in it will complicate your Sunday morning and your Wednesday night? Why do we need to do this? Because these things are the catalyst for growth and the byproduct of God's blessing.

Let me close with this. At the end of his earthly life, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. It was a celebration of course, of Israel's exodus out of Egypt. It was a sacred celebration, but there is a plot twist in the Gospels. Jesus redefines what it means. It says he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it. Then he said something that made no sense until about 24 hours later. He said, this is my body, and then after supper he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. That same night, Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples for 30 pieces of silver. Don't know this for sure, but probably sanctuary shekels because he was paid off by the high priest. It's not an easy calculation, but in today's currency, the shekels would be worth about 72 cents apiece. Judas betrayed Jesus for a 20 spot.

Let me flip that ancient coin. Jesus might've been worth \$21 and 60 cents to Judas. Judas was worth the cross, the Christ. It's where self-worth comes from. It's where wholly confidence comes from. It's about what Christ was willing to do so that we could experience his blessing. This weekend we celebrate communion at all of our campuses. In fact, we will every week during this series, and I'm going to tell you why. I think communion is a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. Now maybe you're dealing with the curse of criticism or the curse of mistakes you've made or maybe the curse of trauma inflicted on your life. Listen, the cross is the place where the curse is broken. The cross is the place where sin is forgiven. The cross is the place where chains are broken, where the blessing is bestow.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians called the communion cup, are you ready for this, the cup of blessing. If one end of Ariadne's thread is tied to original blessing, I think the other end is tied to the communion table; it is tied to the cup of blessing. So I want to invite our ushers to comment all of our campuses. We're going to distribute the bread and the cup in just a minute, but I want to do two things. First, maybe you're here this weekend and you have never celebrated communion before. This is an open invitation. Now, I think it's important to understand what the bread and the cup represent, but I can't think of a better way to take the first step or next step in your personal journey than to celebrate communion. You might even want to keep that little cup as a little memento of a pretty big step.

Now the second thing I want to encourage us to do is to examine ourselves. The apostle Paul, First Corinthians 12:28 says, "*everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat the bread and drink the cup*". Now, the amplified version says thoroughly examine. A couple of weeks ago, our team took our planning retreat, annual planning retreat, and we did some SWAT analysis. Now if you're in business, very familiar with this, right? In fact, I'm going to put it up on the screen and this is identifying internal strengths and weaknesses and then external opportunities and threats.



I think this might be a helpful way for us to approach communion this weekend. What if we did a little SWAT analysis of ourselves? I'm less concerned about some of those external things. Well, what have we made sure that in those first couple of quadrants that we're doing a little bit of self examination? We tend to think of confession in negative terms and I get that. Certainly need to confess what's wrong. First, John 1:8 & 9, *"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"*. So confession is the way that we reset spiritually, but it's not just resetting what's wrong, I think it's celebrating what's right. Romans 10:9 & 10, *"if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved"*. That is a confession of faith. I want us to do both of those things as we prepare to celebrate communion.

Not long ago, our worship team wrote a song titled 'Confession'. It'll be on the album that we record next year. I love this song, I can't stop listening to it, and so our teams are going to come and lead us in that song. After we do a little bit of examination, a little bit of confession, you can hang on to the bread and the cup our campus pastors are to come at all of our campuses and they will lead us in communion. But I want us to prepare our hearts to drink the cup of blessing.

Lord, right now, would you meet us right here, right now and God, would you speak to each one of us? Lord, thank you that your blessings are as unique as our fingerprint and so is your mercy and so is your grace. God, I pray that you would reveal your heart towards us in these moments just like you did on the cross so long ago. And so right now we make a beeline to the cross. We kneel at the foot of that cross and we drink the cup of blessing because of what you accomplish for us. In Jesus name. Amen.