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October 3, 2021  
Feast of St. Francis observed

Now that I am a seasoned priest, almost four whole years under my belt, I can look back at those early days and laugh at my insecurities and my apprehension about the perceived weight tied to the solemn charge I was given at my ordination.

My first moment of panic related to my new priestly responsibilities, came only moments after my ordination right here in this sanctuary. The congregation was filing into the Parish Hall for the lunch my family had lovingly prepared in celebration, and my mentor and fellow priest, stopped me, lowered her head before me and asked for a blessing.

And I had NO IDEA what I was supposed to do. I may have been standing in the house of the Lord, but that couldn't stop the panicked string of (well, not very nice words), that flew through my head. None spoken out loud, mind you, but they were there waiting to burst from my lips. I had been ordained for five whole minutes and already I didn't know what the heck I was doing. I had seen priests bless people, of course, but I wasn't exactly sure what words they used. I knew it usually involved laying hands on the person's head and making the sign of the cross, but I had received no training or instruction in the art of blessing, and my mind was blank.

So I mumbled something about being overwhelmed by it all and not ready to bless and my friend could probably see the terror in my eyes, so she took a step back. And while my friend may have inwardly wondered how this priest thing would go for me, outwardly she just smiled and gave me a hug.

Well since that day, I have come to see blessing as one of the most joyful parts of my job. When I bless the bread and wine at communion, when I do the blessing at the end of a service, when I say a healing blessing at mid-week worship, when babies are brought to the altar for a blessing during communion, and of course, at our annual pet blessing.

And as much as I love doing blessings in my role as priest, if you hear nothing else from my sermon today, I want you to hear that we *all* have the power to bless and that being a priest doesn't give me any more power to bless than you.

I've been reading this beautiful book by John O'Donohue called, *To Bless the Space Between Us*. In it, O'Donohue explores the power of blessing and argues that as a society, we are hungry for blessing, now more than ever. In this book, he also offers up a series of blessings for what he calls those threshold moments in our lives, those times when we are crossing over into a new experience or moment in our lives.

In our culture, it's easy to give the world a vision of our lives that is perfection and success. We control the images on social media that define us. It's easy to hide

anxiety, loneliness, and even despair. And we move at such a fast pace that we often don't even know until it's too late, that we are desperately missing authentic and honest connection with each other. O'Donohue claims that , "We have fallen out of belonging. [And] Consequently, when we stand before crucial thresholds in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, encourage and guide us as we cross over into the unknown." (xiv)

Even eight hundred years ago, St. Francis was able to perceive the emptiness of worldly success and wealth. And he devoted his life to both seeking blessing and giving blessing. He knew that the gift of God's creation was our first blessing. He looked to the sun and moon and stars; to the trees, flowers, mountains, rivers and oceans; and to all the curious creatures for a sign of blessing. And he spent much of his days calling blessing upon those he encountered, particularly the poor and the sick—those most in need of touch and recognition and love. A blessing says, I see you. You have worth. You are loved by God. It is reassurance like we heard in our Psalm this morning, "The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore."

Today, we are desperate for meaning and belonging. And we need to rediscover our power to bless one another. Priests typically bless by placing their hands on the head of a person. But there's not just one way to give a blessing, though touch is important. O'Donohue tells us that, "Wherever one person takes another into the care of their heart, they have the power to bless." (207) And then reminds us, "When one is in sorrow or pain, touch can be the silent language that says everything; it travels deeper than words can." (208). Perhaps that is one more reason why the pandemic has left us feeling hollowed out and empty at times. The need for physical distancing has meant fewer opportunities for that touch between friends that is the silent language of blessing.

And perhaps this need for blessing, especially during the pandemic, is one reason why so many people have adopted pets in the past eighteen months. Cats and dogs and other pets have an amazing ability to comfort us and bring joy—they have their own silent language of love for their caretakers that travels deeper than words can.

Blessing can even be called upon inanimate objects, in the hope that they will become infused with the power to protect. Several weeks ago, we had our blessing of the backpacks before we sent our children and teachers back to a new school year. Starting a new year of school is an important transition at any time with not only academic but social challenges and kids trying to figure out who they are. But for the past two years, kids have returned to school under the cloud of a pandemic with all of the anxiety and unknowns that go with that. So blessing this threshold moment seemed more important than ever.

I said the backpack blessing and laid my hand on each of the backpacks of those gathered, calling on God to look over them in the coming year. A parent shared a story with me a couple weeks later, telling me that, as her daughter Lani, a first grader, was preparing for school, she told her mother that she could no longer store anything in the front pocket of her backpack. Because that's where the blessing was, and nothing else

could go in there. Perhaps she was worried that if the pocket was unzipped, the blessing would escape. In Lani's eyes, something magical happened to her backpack in that moment of blessing, and maybe she's on to something. O'Donohue argues that even objects, "when blessed, can become vehicles of grace and protection...and take on the infusion of sacred power, and long after the occasion of blessing has passed the blessed object still retains its protective power." (197-8).

We all know that the world could use more blessing. And sometimes we bless without even realizing it. An offer of help when someone is about to be overwhelmed. A gesture of kindness at just the right moment, when someone is slipping into a dark place.

So let us be intentional in our blessing. Let us understand our need for belonging to one another, and for those rituals that protect, guide and encourage us as we move through the threshold moments in our lives. As we learn to bless one another, we will see that in giving blessings, we find that they return to embrace us, too. May it be so. Amen.