

Less blessing, more human touch



Highland Views

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Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

A hawk walked by today. You read that correctly. It walked. Chalk it up to yet another daily surprise from the mountains of Western North Carolina.

It may have been the same small, white-breasted raptor we saw swoop down on a cardinal the day before. I thought at first the feathered feet crossing the yard belonged to a turkey or crow, but there it was: a hawk. It was walking — not hopping or flitting.

I watched as it walked then ran beneath the rose of Sharon bushes and disappeared.

A hawk that walks. Something new to add to the natural procession passing each day.

Some might say I'd been "blessed" to see this vision of nature's strange beauty. So many things are considered "blessings" — touches of the divine.

Millions say a blessing every day over meals. When I sneeze, my wife usually says, "Bless you," and she often thanks people with a smile and a "Bless you!" I believe she's sincere in this automatic gesture of graciousness.

But I have to say, blessings make me a bit uncomfortable sometimes.

There are blessings for everything, everyone and every situation. In special ceremonies, animals are blessed, so are ships and buildings, babies and marriages. But what exactly IS a blessing? What does it mean to bless and what would happen, bless me, if all these blessed blessings went unspoken?

In the years I was a Christian minister, I said many a blessing. You raise your hands or place them on a head or a shoulder and you say something. Usually you say, "Bless you," "Blessings" or "God bless you," expecting that those words actually DO something. Even some of my pagan friends say "blessed be" and Buddhists bestow blessings on other beings.

But what do blessings really do? When I was a "blessor," I had to ask myself why I was blessing so much and so many. Did I need to bless the person, the food, the bread and wine? Weren't they already good enough, blessed enough? Did I have the power (or the right) to make them "holy"?

In my decades as a chaplain, I also gave blessings, but I knew I had no magic powers. I would say, "We all bless each other here and now," or something similar.

"The LORD bless you and keep you"; "Blessed are the poor"; "May you be blessed"; "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb." We know scriptures and traditions abound with blessings ("The mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you" —Qur'an, 11:73). Countless times we quote the ancient texts or speak the words, expecting something to happen, something to change.

Putting hands on another person and saying a particular word does not, in my experience at least, instantly bestow happiness or health or anything, really. It may serve to make a person or congregation feel uplifted, and maybe that's ultimately the goal, to sense a caring touch.

If "blessing" originally had something to do with



Hawk, NWR, Sacramento. CHRIS HIGHLAND

"making happiness happen," then who is qualified to give it or grant it?

It seems to me there is a sense that a blessing provides assurance (as the hymn says, "Blessed Assurance") that people are making God very happy — it's really about GOD'S happiness, not ours.

On the other hand, if a blessing asserts and affirms that the one who is doing the blessing speaks for the Creator of the Universe and their touch is the Touch of God — it seems more about the blessor than the blessed.

A blessing can assure the suffering person they are being "watched over," cared for, not only by "higher hands" but the "holy hands" of God's own blessed representatives on earth.

When I was the blessor, it made me feel quite special, almost like I had special powers. It felt at times that I was passing along something, onto someone's head or bread. "As I touch you, God touches you; my words are God's words to you."

My clergy friends might respond: "It makes people feel God's presence when I touch their head or their bread, their house or their child. In a sacred manner I am symbolizing God's good pleasure. I have no special powers."

Yet if a person "ordained by God" claims to bless others, offering consolation or confirmation of good favor from beyond and if they truly share our full humanity, then couldn't we common folk equally offer a hand, hug or hour of our time in a similar way?

Later in the morning, I heard a cry over the field. There was the "walking hawk" soaring across the valley. I was grateful to see it, touched by the beauty. I wasn't being blessed. I was simply sensing the goodness and greatness of the wild world.

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