

# *Straight from the "Hart"*

October 22, 2023

## Showers of Blessing -- Beholden



Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are glad you are here and participating in today's time of worship so that we can call upon the him, the rock of our salvation.



### **Testimony of Faith** (P- Pastor, C – Reader with Congregation)

P: Into the silence of the void the Creator spoke,

**C: and the world came into being.**

P: The Word of God in the vastness -- brought light from darkness,

**C: matter from nothing, flesh from dust, life from lifelessness.**

P: In the quiet of a small town in Palestine

**C: the Word of God came to us.**

P: Even though of one being with the Creator,

**C: Jesus our Christ, taking on human form, was born, lived and walked among us, speaking the words of life.**

P: He was crucified, died, and was buried.

**C: He rose from the dead and speaks to us today. He is the one who saves us from ourselves.**

P: In the stillness of our souls the Spirit of God, who is one with the Creator and the Christ, whispers the Word,

**C: and calls us back to the Creator,**

P: back to the Christ, back to the wholeness of everlasting life

**C: in the unity of the Creator, Christ and Spirit.**

~ from *Ash Wednesday (Silence)* Lisa's Liturgies. [sites.google.com/site/lisasliturgies](https://sites.google.com/site/lisasliturgies)  
© 2007 Lisa Frenz. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission." ad. to be responsive.

### **Opening Prayer**

Our Father, we have learned that how we use our time and money and energy reflects our values. Receive us as a sign of our commitment to put ourselves and our resources where our beliefs are. Amen.

ad. from Herb Mather © 2002 General Board of Discipleship

**Responsive Call to Worship** (R – Reader, C – Pastor with Congregation)

R: We live in a generation that is never happy. If we exercise self-denial, and proclaim its benefits, we are called evil hypocrites and judgmental legalists. If we celebrate the possibilities of grace, we are called irresponsible, undisciplined, sin-winkers.

C: **We have come that we may better learn how to live in ways that demonstrate Wisdom.**

(Inspired by Luke 7:31-35)

**Music**

Jesus makes it clear that we cannot always gauge what is right by how people respond to it. Therefore, it is important that we tune in to God so he can keep our lives in tune with him. Let's sing

**Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing**

Words: Robert Robinson, 1758

Music: Wyeth's Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second, 1813

1. Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.  
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.
3. O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

**Theme**

The songwriter mourns how easy it is to lose touch with God, to take for granted the blessings we have received and to not be grateful, and what a shame that is because gratitude may grant us strength and courage. Two quick stories.

Once upon a time, the biggest, proudest tree in the forest didn't think it needed anyone or anything. Nor did he want anyone -- he was also a grumpy old self-sufficient tree. He refused to share the blessings of strength and height. Animals feared him – they would not build nests in his sturdy limbs nor store nuts in his pockets, and dared not even come near enough to escape the hot sun in its shadow.

But it was also an aging tree, and each winter was getting tougher to endure, and

this year was an extraordinarily bitter winter. Many thought this would be the end of the proud tree.

A little girl went to live with her grandma near the forest, and she took frequent walks on its icy paths. She found the now brittle tree quaking and creaking in the cold. Every once in a while, there would be crack and snap and one of its dry limbs would tumble to its feet. The girl decided to bring a warm scarf to its shivering trunk. Those who lived in the forest tried to warn her about the tree and why it was like it was, its threatening attitude and bitterness, but she persisted.

Long story short, the tree who thought he needed no one survived, and then revived the next spring, and learned a lesson from the girl's kind generosity. On a hot spring day she sat down next to the trunk and the proud tree humbly bent down to shade her from the sun. Soon word spread and the all the animals began to enjoy its shade and nest in its trees and store their valuables in its crooks and crannies, and the tree discovered that being kind and generous with others gave him a purpose and a joy that he had missed out on for most of his life. He felt like a young, vibrant tree for the first time in a long time....

ad. from "The Grumpy Tree" Pedro Pablo Sacristán

**Story two.** Once upon a time an octopus was lonely, not because he was proud and mean and didn't need anyone like the tree, but because he was shy and quiet and had a hard time making friends. One day he was trying to catch a slippery oyster and got himself tied up into a massive knot and could not untangle himself no matter how hard he tried. Many fish had passed by -- not noticing or caring. Eventually his desperation, he overcame his embarrassment and shyness, and he began calling to them for help. Still many passed, some even judged him and/or laughed at his predicament. Finally, a small fish stopped to help him untangle himself. The situation was so awkward that this very shy octopus, though greatly relieved and grateful, could only muster a quiet thank you and they parted ways.

The octopus kicked himself all night (with his 8 arms 😊) for missing a great opportunity to capture, to make a friend, and be a little less lonely. A few days later a big fish had come to feed in the area. Many fish were scrambling quickly in lots of different directions. The octopus stayed calm in his quiet little corner of rocks. Though the predator could be a dangerous threat to him, he was well hidden and was not usually the predator's first choice of food. But then the octopus saw who the predator had set his sights on – the little fish that had just helped him out of his tangled mess.

Without even thinking about it, he left his place of safety, and placed himself directly between the little fish and the predator and shot the biggest jet of in he had ever shot in his entire life. It irritated the predator's scales and gills, and he frustratedly swam off to recover.

All the other fish gathered around, and the little fish told their stories and said, "I didn't know anyone could be so grateful that they would risk anything like that." And all the fish realized the octopus was not mean, just shy – he was actually a really thankful, kind, humble, and loyal friend that they all wanted to befriend. And while the lonely octopus was still shy, he was never lonely again.

ad. from "An Octopus in Trouble" by Pedro Pablo Sacristán

We are about to hear a story of a proud, powerful, not needing anyone person who was not grateful for his blessings (like the tree -- started out) and in his midst comes a woman (like the octopus) who because of her expression of immense gratitude risks doing things that customs would frown on. We'll hear more about that in the second reading and sermon. But for now, the tree, we'll just say that this man would reject his purpose and normally have nothing to do with this woman, but Jesus brings them into the same sphere so he can see her thankfulness.

Jesus speaks about his appreciation for the ministry of John the Baptist, and the people who had been baptized by John saw John's ministry as right and fulfilling God's purpose. But the religious leaders and experts rejected this purpose, leading Jesus to observe that many people (especially those who think they are experts in what is right) can be nearly impossible to please. We heard this during the call to worship.

## **Intro to and Responsive Bible Story 1**

On the heels of this observation, Jesus accepts an invitation to dinner with just such an expert. Perhaps from the summary of this story, we can learn that these self-made, powerful, and hypercritical people may also tend to lack appreciation and gratitude.

(R – Reader, **C – Pastor with Congregation**)

**R:** During the visit, a person living a sinful life came to Jesus and lavished love on him with perfume and tears on his feet, wiping them with her hair.

**C:** **A holy man was offended by her display because of the kind of person she was. He was also offended by Jesus who should know this yet chose not to disconnect from her.**

R: Therefore, Jesus told him a story: Two men owed money, one a tiny bit, one a whole lot. Neither could repay. The man who lent the money canceled both debts. Which debtor do you think was more grateful?

**C: The one with the bigger debt.**

R: Then Jesus said, I came to your house, and you did not offer even the most basic obligations of greeting and hospitality. But this person has gone above and beyond the call of doing *your* job,

**C: and she did this out of love.**

R: Therefore, her sins are forgiven, for she loved much, while you loved little and have been forgiven little.

**C: It is *faith* that saves us to go in peace.** (summarized from Luke 7:36-50)

### Special Music

Jesus reminded a man of faith that in his self-perception of goodness, he didn't feel the need to perform the very basic customs of proper hospitality, and remember hospitality rules were quite stringent in their culture. He needed to start counting how much has actually been done for him and to stop taking his blessings for granted, like the other person, who was clearly grateful. It is a good reminder for all of us, that whether we are living high or just getting by, that we should be Counting Our Blessings...



Today's "Seasonal Singers": Donna Allmond (piano, not pictured), Kathy Novak (flute), Randy Bell (bass guitar) Left to Right of singers: Men: Charles Kirkpatrick, Chris Rice, Gary Sunderland, Pastor Chuck Williams, Women: Mary Jo Bell, Ann Martin, Sherrie Rice, Cheri Holt, Donna Webber and Jan Martin (not easily seen behind) Sara Williams.

### Count Your Blessings

Words: Johnson Oatman Jr., 1897 Music: Edwin O Excell,  
arr. by Evelyyn Simpson-Currenton, 1953 © 2000 GIA Publications

1. When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,  
when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,  
count your many blessings, name them one by one,  
and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

## Refrain

Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
 Count your blessings, see what God hath done;  
 Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
 Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

2. Are you ever burdened with a load of care?  
 Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?  
 Count your many blessings, ev'ry doubt will fly,  
 and you will be singing as the days go by.

## Refrain

3. When you look at others with their lands and gold,  
 think that Christ has promised you his wealth untold;  
 Count your many blessings, money cannot buy  
 your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

## Refrain

4. So, amid the conflict, whether great or small,  
 do not be discouraged, God is overall;  
 Count your many blessings, angels will attend,  
 help and comfort give you to your journeys end.

## Refrain

**Music**

When we count our blessings, we realize that God the Father and Jesus are worthy of our praise and honor... Let's prepare our hearts for prayer by singing.

**You Are Worthy**

Words: Trad. Latin American,

English trans. by Raquel Mora Martinez © 2000 Abingdon Press, adm by The Copyright Co,

Music: Trad. Latin American

You are worthy, God almighty,  
 praise and honor to you belong.

## Repeat

King all glorious, all victorious,  
 praise and honor are yours alone.

## Repeat

**Prayers**

Lord, you deserve all honor and glory because you gave the most expensive gift of all in your Son, Jesus Christ. Oh, how lavishly you poured out this costly gift of your grace upon us. Help us to learn from you, for at times, we are so skilled at

recognizing and catering to our own desires -- while ignoring the needs of others. Equip us to live unselfishly and more sensitively. Remove our blinders, that we may more clearly see the needs of others. **Praises and Petitions** Specifically, we pray for several requests from Jan Martin – who had some bad test results, adjusting meds and praying for better report this week, \* for the turmoil going on in the life of Reese and Calvin - for wisdom, direction, and comfort, \* for friends Linda and Bill Chenoweth -- she can't see, he is her caregiver and has throat cancer, \* and for her friend Tom, who is meeting with his friend Don, who has terminal lung cancer – pray for blessing on that meeting, that it will have a lingering positive impact on both of them \* Terri Priess asks for Kathy Tomasheski, who previously had back surgery and now needs neck surgery, \* and for Scarlet, a 3 yr old girl with cancer, and Cheri Holt updates Joyce Vahala, who had hemorrhages from her burns which has set back her recovery and she remains in the hospital. We continue to pray for \* the Gordoniers' friend Al Davis, \* for peace in the Mideast and other areas of the world where violence is currently the norm \* and the pastor's friend Sally renewed her request for her friend Wes, who is positive for melanoma, and praying it has not spread and that they can remain with positive attitudes. \* and for those not named out loud but are certainly on our hearts and minds, we pause for a moment to lift those personal requests up as well. (Pause) Now fill our lives with your love. so that whenever the odor of cynicism and despair hangs in the air, we may spread love's fragrance, serving your people and showing your glory through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray. **LORD's PRAYER**

portions ad. from the website of the Office of Theology, Presbyterian Church USA. [pcusa.org](http://pcusa.org)  
and from Bruce Prewer's Home Page. [bruceprewer.com](http://bruceprewer.com)

## Intro to and Bible Reading 2

Siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus are close friends of Jesus. Lazarus gets sick and dies. Jesus predicts that this will lead him to being glorified. He arrives after Lazarus has been in a tomb for four days. One at a time, the sisters go outside the town to greet him in very similar ways – in great faith (you could have made him well) and with a bit of judgment (but you weren't here in time). Long story short, in a powerful and emotional scene, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. John is telling us that those who turn to Christ do not only participate in everlasting life at its end, but Jesus brings life (literal and metaphorical) to our days even now.



The result of this event is that Jesus withdrew from public view. His enemies were keeping an eye out to arrest him if he showed up in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. See John 11, esp vv 17 ff Now we pick up the story...

Six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus—the man he had raised from the dead. A dinner was prepared in Jesus' honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him. Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance.

But Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray him, said, "That perfume was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor." Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself.

Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

When all the people heard of Jesus' arrival, they flocked to see him and also to see Lazarus, the man Jesus had raised from the dead. Then the leading priests decided to kill Lazarus, too, for it was because of him that many of the people had deserted them and believed in Jesus.

John 12:1-11 (NLT)

## Music

Both of our readings teach us the need to be grateful for all the wonderful things God is doing in our lives. If comfortable, let's stand before the sermon and sing

### Now Thank We All Our God

Words: Martin Rinkart, 1663; trans. by Catherine Winkworth, 1858

Music: Johann Cruger, 1647; Harm. by Felix Mendelssohn, 1840

1. Now thank we all our God,  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom this world rejoices;  
who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.





2. O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,  
with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;  
and keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed;  
and free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

## Sermon Beholden

Jesus had said that raising Lazarus would bring his glorification. Most would have understood it at the time as he would do something that would increase his honor, like a great player who makes a clutch plays that win the game. What they did not understand at the time is that it was a trigger that led to being raised on the cross and then his death and resurrection and having a glorified body. That is a totally different kind of idea, isn't it? There is a big difference between "getting glory" and "getting a glorified body" – we think very different scenarios in our head when we think of those phrases.

**The first reaction** to this glorification idea is that many people saw, or heard second hand, what Jesus did with Lazarus, and believed that he indeed did have the power to defeat the last enemy, (death). They changed their opinion about their traditional belief system and began to put their faith in Jesus Christ. This particular Bible text doesn't elaborate on this, so I won't either. (John 11:45)

**The second reaction:** Some believed the event, but instead of a new found faith in the Messiah, they became worried about what this meant for the normal, comfortable, power structures in which they lived. They went and reported it to the religious leaders, who were so concerned about this turn of events that they called a special meeting. It was in this meeting that the decision was made that Jesus should die "*for the sake of the world*", which was the perfect prophecy, but they understood in a completely different way than we think it. For them, his death was to save the world as it is, whereas we mean it to say that he would save the world from what it was and is. (John 11:46) For them, Jesus and his values were getting in the way. Removing Jesus was the practical, political, preservative move so that they could they could maintain their world as they knew it. (John 11:47-48) What they didn't understand was that their world was already perishing under that structure of power and domination and darkness and sin, and it would take the death and resurrection of the Messiah to



usher in, or at least initiate the possibility of dearly needed *new* power structures of love and peace and hope and grace to save it from what it is. (John 11:49-50)

You've got two of them. These reactions were prior to our reading. **The third response** to God's glory is demonstrated by Judas, and this takes us into the story of the text we read. Judas has a pretty bad reputation with us. And despite the song by Sidewalk Prophets which includes these lyrics: "I am the thorn in your crown, the sweat from your brow, the nail in your wrist, I am Judas' kiss, the man in the crowd who yelled out from the crowd for your blood to be spilling on this earth shaking ground and turned away with a smile on my face with this sin in my heart tried to bury your grace..." The singer was admitting that we are all sinners and we've all done this. We would like to say we are none of those, but we feel especially confident that we would never respond like Judas -- in any situation. But there is often a difference between what we think and say and wish, and what we live. (John 12:4ff)

Wipe out the 2000 years of Monday night quarterbacking -- the second guessing based on information that we find out *after* the fact. They didn't know it at the time. So set aside the embezzling motivation, they didn't know that. Set aside the betrayal, they didn't know that. We don't know these things yet when this story happens. Judas was likely responsible for the money because he was truly gifted in that area. Put yourself in the room and you are in charge of church finances, (there is at least one person who can relate to that 😊) and the group's finances essentially make it possible for us to live from day to day. And if you know what is going on with our church finances, we can all relate to that too. And you are reclining with Lazarus and Jesus, and you see a woman come in and dump a full year's wages on Jesus' feet. What can you buy with a year's wages? What could the church do with a year of somebody's wages? Not so easy to not react like Judas now, is it? if we are really honest.

But more to the point, let's move beneath the surface of the complaint and get to the heart of this response. This reaction to Jesus' glorification is to be tempted to hang around Jesus to empower our own glorified agenda. We want his gifts and power so we can become something important in our own eyes, or perhaps more nobly, to accomplish a cause that we believe in -- but that might not quite line up with what God's agenda is...

For someone like Judas, who most now believe was a zealot -- who favored a revolution to overthrow Rome (and his betrayal was an attempt to force Jesus'

hand to do just that), and who may well have been gifted with the administration of money, and his focus on his revolutionary cause and on money resources for that cause (and for himself) instead of for ministry and support of that group that traveled with Jesus -- this became his downfall.

Sometimes we are tempted in areas of our strength rather than our weaknesses. When our gifts and abilities become the primary focus of our lives instead of God, our view of what we do with our gifts, and what others should do with their gifts can easily become skewed. We get off track.

So we watch Mary perform a great act of love before our very eyes, and instead of seeing a great act of love, all we see is a great waste of resources and energy and love that we could have really used – we see an inappropriate action.

This brings us to the **fourth and final reaction** to the glorification of Jesus. We didn't hear the details in the first reading with the other woman, but the actions of the women in both stories are almost identical. About the only difference is the woman in the first story also used tears. Mary took her most valuable possession, broke its container, and poured it over the feet of Jesus, -- I didn't mention this and it isn't in my script, but I should probably say it to make it more clear – when that was done on Jesus' feet – it was the host's responsibility to take care of a traveler's feet, because they travel – walk – on dirty, dusty paths and so the custom was that the host was to make sure a servant was supposed to care for guest's feet when they arrived, or do it themselves. In the first story, that host did not do that, but the woman did. In the story we are talking about now, the foot care custom had probably already been cared for when Mary poured the expensive perfume and wiped his feet dry with her hair, filling the room with the scent of the perfume. Remember, Jesus had just restored the life of her brother, and now she is lavishly outpouring her gratitude. (John 12:3)

O' Henry wrote a short story that you are probably familiar with called *The Gift of the Magi*. A young couple was recently married and deeply in love, but also very poor. His only treasured possession was a gold pocket watch – not a given by his grandfather to his father and then down to him. Her only possession was her beautiful long golden hair. Christmas was coming, and they had nothing with which to express their love to each other. She went out and had her hair cut, sold it to a wig maker, and with it bought a platinum fob (a chain) with which to hang the pocket watch. While she was out doing that, he was out pawning his watch so he could purchase a set of fancy jeweled tortoiseshell combs for her beautiful hair that

she no longer had. Though they had very little, each gave all they had to express their love to each other...

Some of us may not feel like we have much to give, we may not feel like any special talents, but when God asks us to offer it anyway, and we do in trust and faith do that, he amplifies and beautifies what we can give and makes it something special.

I may have also told you about the young parents who were eager to expose their young child to culture and took him to hear a famous classical concert pianist. Near the end of an intermission they lost track of him like parents sometimes do with little active children in big crowded rooms -- and they were searching for him everywhere but could not find him. As the curtains opened, to their horror and the dismay of the crowd as well, they found him sitting at the grand piano -- playing chopsticks or some other simple childish tune. The professional pianist rushed on to the stage and whispered into the young child's ear. "Just keep playing, just keep playing", and the master pianist wrapped his arms around the child and filled in the tune, turning into something beautiful. When we give what we have to God, he can make it something special.

Not only do we give all, but we also give in humility. Mary poured the oil on Jesus' feet, not on his head. Putting on the head was the normal custom for an anointing, feet is what servants did for guests. By Mary anointing his feet, then, it was seen as a humble act of service. As a matter of fact, Mary was always at Jesus feet. Long ago, while Martha was serving Jesus, Mary had learned the lesson that there must be time for quietness and discipleship and adoration. She sat at his feet in those happy days. (Luke 10:38-39) She also sat at his feet just days prior, when Lazarus was dead, and her world was miserable and collapsing all around her. When Jesus arrived, she immediately went to him and went straight to his feet and poured out her heart just as Martha had. (John 11:32ff, 11:20ff)

And now that Jesus restored Lazarus, and life prevailed over death in the highest of victories, again, she sails straight to his feet. And she did it without worrying about the proper social graces – in the first story the woman wasn't even supposed to be around a holy man like that host, or Jesus (in the host's opinion). In both cases, women were not supposed to lower their hair in public. They didn't care about what people thought about them or about the extravagant gift. (Like the girl in the forest and the octopus in the ocean, immense gratitude overcame all hesitations). In a culture that tended to rely solely on the men to provide, to bring

her brother back was more than just a family reunion -- this was probably salvation from a personal economic disaster. And all she felt was beholden, (a gratitude so deep that it could not not be expressed. It is almost like having to pay a debt, you just can't not do it. – like the octopus – didn't even think about it and off it went to help. She gave to him all that she had and all that she was.

Mary exemplifies what it means to give all of what we are -- to give our time, our talents and gifts, our resources... to try and give hope to hopeless, joy to the hapless, to accomplish ministries that seem beyond our ability, beyond our common sense. If we are obedient to God beyond people and peer pressure, and do it without holding back, it may well lead to the glorification of Christ in the best sense of that word.

So unreservedly trust him, and be grateful to him, and let all things be available for him with no reservations, no holding back...

**So we have four responses.** What best describes your response to God's glorious presence in your life? [Response 1] Like those who heard death was defeated and put their faith in Christ, do we put him *on* our life's agenda? [Response 2] Like those who reported to the religious leaders and those leaders themselves, do we think he is *in the way* of our life's agenda, our world's agenda, and try to minimize or remove his influence from our life? [Response 3] Like Judas, does Jesus become *a resource* to fleshing out our own agenda? [Response 4] Or like the women in our stories, do we gratefully *make him the agenda* of our life, realizing He is the source of life, the power over death, the one who wakens our spirit? The One who brings hope and life to our world?

John shows us that our choice should be clear and consistent. None of us are perfect, but we will not fool God, and eventually, anyone -- if we jump from one response type to another depending on the moment of the day -- what is most convenient, or who is surrounding us. Jesus couldn't have been the sacrifice that saved the world if he jumped from one response to another. He had to give it all, from birth - to life - to death – to resurrection. And we should strive to make our response to be as consistent (and growing) as is possible throughout the days of our life.

An Aesop's Fable illustrates the danger of unclear response choices: The beasts and the birds and the bats. Do you remember that one? (No response). Good, I didn't tell it to you before 😊). In Aesop's fables, the birds and the beasts were at war. The bats wanted to be on the winning side, so whoever won the battle, they

would try to be on that side. If the birds won a battle, they would soar through the air saying they were birds. If the beasts won a battle, they would walk around on the ground saying they were beasts. It didn't take too long for both sides to figure that out and they were rejected by both the birds and the beasts. From that day on the bats had to live in hiding, and to this day live only in dark caves, daring to come out only at night. That is the fable.

[SIDE NOTE] When I was looking for this fable again – online – because I was her and my book was at home -- I found an article that used this story to teach the lesson that we cannot be neutral or in the middle on a topic, which I think is one of the weirdest applications I ever heard. This is NOT what this story is about. The fact is the truth is often in the middle. Truth is down the middle of the road –you can err in ditches on either side of the road, or on a pendulum, if truth is in the middle, you can swing either way to opposite extremes from that truth. Aesop was not condemning the bats for being neutral, they were not condemned for not taking sides. They were not punished for refraining from the battle – they were rejected for pretending to be fully a part of one side and then when it seemed more convenient, to jump to the other side and pretend they were fully endorsing and supporting them, and then when it seemed the other side was getting the upper hand they would jump back to the other side. It'd be like the Houston-Texas series – whoever is winning is who you are rooting for – back and forth you go! And when the hypocritical games were discovered, that is when the bats were rejected. It wasn't about being neutral or in the middle, it is about pretending to be one thing when you are not really that.

Some people want to live in two worlds. They want to soar in the spiritual heavens, but not all the time. Only when it is practical, within reason, when it is personally beneficial, when we are in the presence of other birds, when it fits the image, we want to project, but never in the presence of the beasts of the world.

There is a sharp dividing line between the holy and the unholy, the grateful women on the one side and the self-centered, powerful, aggressive opposers on the other. We may convert from one side to the other, we may from time to time fail to be what we want (maybe more than we like to admit), but we cannot be constantly and deliberately jumping back and forth and get away with it for long. We'll destroy ourselves.

The overflowing abundance of grace in Jesus and the heavenly Father can only met by a response of overflowing gratitude for what he has done for us. We've been blessed to bless others. We are graciously chosen to be God's beloved. We are beholden -- deeply indebted in our gratitude to God for the price Christ has willingly, lovingly paid for us. So the question today is not "ARE we grateful that God sent His Son who gave his all to bring eternal life to us even now?" The question is, "HOW grateful are we?"

## **Prayer**

Lord, we can never pay you back for what you have done for us. Nor do you desire us to try to out love or out give you – what you ask is that we live generous lives of love in our world, according to how you have gifted and graced us, and through that, we reveal who you are ... to love others as you have loved us -- and how we go about that gains clarity as we continually put our life at your feet. It is in Jesus' name that we pray this. Amen.

## **Music**

If we are going to gratefully be a blessing for others, then we need to continue receiving God's blessings constantly because we can't put it out if we don't get it in. Let's sing a prayer that the promised blessings will come our way...

### **There Shall Be Showers of Blessing**

Words: D W Whittle, 1883; Music: James McGlanahan, 1883

1. There shall be showers of blessing -- this is the promise of love;  
There shall be seasons refreshing, sent from the Savior above.

#### **Refrain**

Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need;  
mercy drops around us are falling, but for the showers we plead.

2. There shall be showers of blessing -- precious reviving again;  
over the hills and the valleys sound of abundance of rain.

#### **Refrain**

3. There shall be showers of blessing -- send them upon us, O Lord;  
Grant to us now a refreshing,, come and now honor thy word.

#### **Refrain**

4. There shall be showers of blessing -- O that today they might fall,  
now as to God we're confessing, now as on Jesus we call!

#### **Refrain**

## **Series Blessing**

Now having been blessed by grace, move into your world with confidence in God, for you are beloved by God – formed, chosen, blessed, and given life to live as his holy children. Amen.

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CCLI # 2561297