

An Altar in the World
Chapter Twelve
The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings

This study guide is formatted for a small group gathering. If you choose to use it as a small group leader or as an individual, feel free to adapt it in whatever way seems meaningful to you. Enjoy!

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Lesson prep:

Print out homework assignments and Wendell Barry poems.
Set out Bibles.

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

To pronounce a blessing is to see it from a divine perspective.

*For reasons beyond our understanding, God decided to be made known in the flesh.
Matter matters to God.*

A blessing does not confer holiness. Because God made these things, they already share in God's own holiness.

Related Scripture:

Romans 12:14-18 Bless those who persecute you
Genesis 27:1-40 Jacob gets Isaac's blessing
Genesis 32:22-28 Jacob wrestles with God
Psalms 72:17-20 Blessing of David

Introductions:

Share your meaningful object/words that help you arrive at an attitude of prayer.

Answer this question: would you rather jump off a high diving board or try to say something holy in front of other people?

Gathering Activity:

If it is a nice day outside, pass out the Wendell Berry poems and have the class read them to a tree or bush or to a person they meet on the street outside the church.

OR

Practice blessing something simply because it exists alongside you and watch what happens inside you as the blessing goes out of you, toward something that does not deserve it. Here are some sample blessings based on Jewish tradition. Use one of these or create your own blessing.

"Blessed are you, Lord our God, by whose word all things come into being."

"Blessed are you, Lord our God, who has made the works of creation."

"Blessed are you, Lord our God, who feeds all living things."

Reflection/discussion:

Read the scripture passages above to sample some Biblical blessings.

It is a big mistake to perpetuate the illusion that only certain people can bless things. Do you feel worthy to bless something? What things do you bless, if any? How do you decide what to bless?

(grace at dinner, bedtime prayers with kids, someone who sneezes)

When you pronounce a blessing, do you confer holiness or simply recognize it?

What does Barbara Brown Taylor mean when she writes: *the key to blessing things is to receive their blessing?* (page 196)

Do blessing prayers overlook pain or suffering? (page 204)

(they decline to judge what is blessed. the decision they reveal is this: when given a choice between a blessing and a curse, a blessing has more potential to transform)

Are we smart enough to tell the difference between what is bad for us and what is good?

(page 205) (the blessing covers your ignorance and seeds your curiosity...so this is what life has brought you! How will this change things? What can you make of this?)

Can you bless/embrace things as they are instead of waiting until they are what they should be? (page 206)

Read from the book (page 205) about the dream and the blessing of the monster.

What do you make of this?

Read from the book (pages 207-209) about the benediction of Barbara Brown Taylor's father in the ER. Have you ever received or desired such a blessing?

Closing:

Offer this blessing to one another. (Sing it if you know the tune).

An Irish Blessing

(A Blessing from St. Patrick)

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
May the rains fall soft upon your fields,
And, until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

Homework:

Take the Wendell Berry poems and read them out loud sometime this week. You can read them to a tree, to your dog, to a friend. You decide.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

What We Need Is Here

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be

quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.