

Special

As I have prepared this sermon, I have had a particularly difficult time maintaining my focus and keeping to the point. So let me say my point right up front. We are special. This congregation is special. And if that is our message to the world, we are lost. If we don't do something with our specialness, except tell each other how special—different, unique, weird, difficult, advanced, creative, evolved—how great we are—we are lost.

Let the wanderings and digressions begin!

The title. I have had trouble deciding on a title for this talk. I love the concept from the Bethel Bible Series of Blessed to be a Blessing. From our scripture passage, for a while the title was Called According to God's Purpose. This morning, it's "We're Special and What Are We Gonna Do About It."

The idea of blessing is an important concept in the Old Testament. Fathers gave their blessing to their first born sons. Mothers conspired with second born sons to steal blessings. Brothers killed each other over blessings. To be blessed made you special. It was more than just nice words. It carried with it the inheritance of land, livestock, and the favor of God. In essence it was power. The Jews struggled with being a blessing—sometimes they got stopped, as we sometimes do, at just being special.

The story of Joseph is like that. Joseph was special to his father, Jacob. He wasn't the first born, but he was Rachel's first born, and Rachel was Jacob's true love. Joseph was blessed with his father's favor and demonstrations of that favor. Joseph understood that he was special and he took liberties with that standing. He acted as though he was better than his brothers, lording over them his specialness. Joseph's actions and attitude flowed out of his sense of being special, privileged, better than; and not out of his sense of being blessed. He was hardly a blessing to his brothers. He used his specialness to irritate them, so much so, that they got rid of him. You know the story, either from Sunday School, sermons, or from the musical. Joseph was able to turn from the temptation to take revenge or to withhold goodness from his brothers, and instead become a blessing to Egypt and those brothers who had mistreated him. The road from spoiled child of privilege to mature, powerful adult of God, is often a jagged, uneven one.

The writers of the gospels tell us in lots of ways that Jesus was special. The accounts of his birth, his baptism, his ministry, his teachings, his death tell us that he was the most special person ever. Jesus, the Most Special One, went around treating others like they were special to him, and especially to God. He lived and related to others out of his relationship with God and what he knew God was like. He kept practices of prayer and meditation to renew his sense of connectedness to his father. Abba—a word that indicated the special nature of his relationship with God; and one that points to the possibilities of our having an intimate relationship with God. He stayed connected to God so he could keep clear his purpose and be empowered to fulfill it. Jesus, the fulfillment of the law and prophets, is the one who shows us what "special" is supposed to look like.

As spiritual children of Abraham, and followers of Jesus, we are special. This congregation has been exceedingly blessed. Many of us were a part of Broadway Baptist Church for years where we received teaching on relationships, worship, healing, and the nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We had laboratory time in our small groups, worship services, healing services, conferences, and individual hands on prayer times where we tried out those teachings and experienced connections of love and presence and power from the Spirit of God and from the community. We have been exceedingly blessed as Crossroads Church as we have participated in community building and faith strengthening actions of values exploration, governance innovation, open space technology, spiritual practices, mission trips, and work groups. We have been blessed by people, by one another. There have been numerous friends of Crossroads and speakers along the way. We were blessed to have Gary Harris, our interim pastor early on; Jared Huguenot, our intern in those early years; and now Jack and his family. We have been blessed by the continuing faithfulness of Bob Rockford on staff. We are blessed with the addition of each new person who joins us.

We are special, but as an identity, that can be shallow and immature. Like Joseph we have taken a few knocks along the way that are meant to mature us to become powerful people of God. Believing ourselves to be more special than others, and thereby better than others, causes us to put too much attention into protecting our sense of special. Again, looking at Jesus to show us the way, we know that specialness is not a position to be protected, but a position out of which we are to expansively spend ourselves.

I really can't give a sermon without giving a nod to Walter Brueggemann's idea of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. Remember, orientation is the state of existence where everything is going fine. Disorientation is the experience of an event that disrupts that sense of everything being ok. And reorientation is the new thing, the new position that comes out of that process.

Most of you know that this church was formed out of a split with Broadway Baptist Church, six years ago. Well, the good times, and especially, the sense we had of being special, was a place of orientation. Then we had that stressful and distressing time that led up to the split; and then the actual leaving, which was itself traumatizing and unsettling; and then the establishing of this church. That was disorientation. And that is how I experienced it—it was disorienting for me. To see persons be so sure that they were right—and that they were hearing from God—while it seemed to me to be so wrong, was very disorienting. If they could be so sure and so wrong, then that possibility existed in me, too. I worried that I would ever again be able to trust that I could rightly discern what God might be saying to me. I've been a Christian—a serious, pursuing Christian—all my life. My trust and my confidence were shaken, and that disturbed me greatly. My sense of specialness, of our specialness was disturbed. We were the chosen ones and yet, as a church, we had failed in so many ways.

Disorientation functions to move us from one position to another. Most of us like the familiarity and comfort of orientation and would never leave it willingly. Disorientation is necessary to move us to a new position of reorientation. The work we are to do in disorientation is grief and letting go. It is the letting go of the original orientation to make way for a new understanding, for a new place to stand.

For me the first year of Crossroads Church was a time of grief, regret, confusion, disillusionment, and worry about my ability to trust and have a relationship with Jesus like I had had. It was not possible to reclaim my old relationship—disorientation doesn't allow for going back; you know too much. I had to let go to make way for a new understanding of myself in relationship with God.

That second year, a few of us went to the Youth Specialties conference and I learned about and practiced some of the classic spiritual practices. At that conference during lectio divina, or praying the scripture, I experienced hearing from God in a way that was profound and that I could trust. This was followed by another experience of the prayer of the examen, or taking stock of consolations and desolations, and again I understood that God was speaking to me; and I was overwhelmed. I have never understood my journey with Jesus to be about power, but that is what God was speaking to me about. The surprising result of these experiences was a growing sense of power, of competency. It only makes sense, when I think about it. Following Jesus, to live large like Jesus, takes courage born out of the confidence of being connected to Abba.

Last summer in Colorado, we did spiritual practices every night during the worship service, and that was very meaningful to me. I also decided to take this luxury of time and space that camp afforded, and practice the prayer of the examen every night on my own. Once again I experienced presence, empowerment, expansiveness, and the exchange of trust for my fear. And something new was added over that week—joy. Who knew joy could be the result of a journey of power. Like C.S. Lewis, I was pretty surprised.

Romans 8:26-39: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There are some very large theological ideas in this 8th Chapter of Romans. Verse 31 summarizes all those ideas when Paul says “What are we to say about all this—if God is for us who can be against us?” This idea is reinforced with the picture of God giving all for us in Christ Jesus; Jesus far from condemning us, intercedes for us; and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. These words have always been comforting to me. Lately they have become less about comfort and protection to me and more about courage and expansiveness—what if I lived like it was really true that nothing can separate me from the love of God.

What would you do if you knew for sure to your core that God is for you, that you are special to God? What would I do? Well, I have a very small example. This is not a life-and-death example, but an I-don't-want-to-look-foolish example. During one of our community meetings, it was proposed that we not have our annual direction setting retreat. It was a reasonable proposal born out of concern for overextending the congregation's use of time and energy because we were beginning a capital campaign. Besides which, no one had volunteered to organize a retreat. I experienced a welling up in me that we needed to have this retreat; it was important. Who am I to take responsibility for a retreat? Who am I to think I can pull this off? I am tired an awful lot; and I know there are lots of pieces to planning a retreat and then making it happen. When considering a project, I always fear that I will tire or lose interest before it is accomplished. And then what if no one else has time or thinks it is important enough to come. But I thought I understood God to say “Go!” I observed in myself that a certain amount of fear had been traded in for trust, protectiveness for expansiveness. So to my own amazement, I answered God, “O.K.,” and with the help of others, especially Nancy Newman, we had a retreat.

We know that it is not the spiritual practices that change us. It is God who changes us. The practices help us put ourselves before God, so God can change us; can change our identity. They afford us the opportunity to pay attention. We sang last week that song, “I will Change Your Name.” “You will no longer be called wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid. Your new name will be confidence, faithfulness, overcoming one, joyfulness, friend of God, one who seeks my face.” Experiences with God convince us that we are special to God—the good kind of special of relationship and purpose. I need reminders and opportunities. I need Sunday morning worship service, experiences of ministry and missions, and practices that help me pay attention and be in a position to receive. I need conversations and companions to stimulate me, correct me, challenge me, edit me; and let me know that I am valued.

We are special, each of us. Crossroads Church is special. Being special is not the ending place. It is the place out of which faithfulness can grow and mature. Being special does not mean we are best or most special. Lots of other people and churches are called to some other purpose than we are. We need to be cheering for them, not finding fault with them. We are not called to comparisons and competition. Just being more special, more creative, more weird and more evolved than other Christians or churches is too small. We are called to confidence, generosity, expansiveness and joyfulness. We are called according to the purposes of God. We are called to faithfulness in continuing to nurture our relationship with God and to faithfulness in doing what God gives us passion for doing.

Dallas Willard, a contemporary theologian, writes in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*:

Jesus' good news about the kingdom can be an effective guide for our lives only if we share his view of the world in which we live. To his eyes this is a God-bathed and God-permeated world. It is a world filled with a glorious reality, where every component is within the range of God's direct knowledge and control—though he obviously permits some of it, for good reasons, to be for a while otherwise than as he wishes. It is a world that is inconceivably beautiful and good because of God and because God is always in it. It is a world in which God is continually at play and over which he constantly rejoices. Until our thoughts of God have found every visible thing and event glorious with his presence, the world of Jesus has not yet fully seized us.

I think we may indeed be called to evangelism, to the sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ that this is a God-bathed and God-permeated world. Our message to others is that God is trustworthy and Jesus shows us the way to live in this awareness. We are special but that is not our message. That is the nature of our relationship that allows us to have courage, to take chances, to risk letting go of what enslaves us—to recognize our Egypt and leave it even if for the uncertain desert. That is where God is and God is joyously at play. We can tell others so with confidence, because we know it to be so; because we have experienced it.

Let us now encourage one another in paying attention to what God is doing new in us and with us. Jack has been telling us that the world needs us. I agree. It doesn't need to know how special we are. It needs the fruit of that specialness. We are blessed to be a blessing. May God save us from stopping short of the goal and from living too small. Amen