



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Mourning into Dancing” Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

HAPPY NEW YEAR! It’s good to see you looking so good, a year later!

The New Year is a great time—with the days off—to take stock of where we have been and where we want to go. A good-natured British company posted the following sign for the enjoyment of their customers. "We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coal rationing, government control, and bad payers. We have been cursed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed, and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next."

One of the best evaluations for business is to ask, “What business are you in, and how’s business?” It sounds simple, but it’s amazing to see how many corporations and companies and partnerships do not know what business they’re in.

The church is “in business”, too. We’re not out to make a profit, but we do have goals and missions. Our vision is “to passionately love the Lord Jesus Christ, and radiate that love to every one.” Our four missions at this time are: 1) to make disciples who make disciples; 2) to increase our church health in certain specific ways; 3) to develop a master plan for our present campus, as God directs us to meet local needs; and 4) to start a new congregation. How have we been doing a loving the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, as Jesus told us in Matthew 22:37-39? How have we been doing at radiating that love to every person, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves?

The little ditty we learned in Sunday School as kids—“This is the church and this is the steeple; open up the door and see all the people.” One of the great things about that little song is that it teaches us the church is its people. The church—our church—succeeds as each of us passionately loves the Lord Jesus Christ and radiates that love to each one.” That’s the business we are in. So, how’s business in your territory—your web of relationships? Has your love for God grown this past year, or shriveled? The most recent survey of our people last year suggested we have slipped a bit in “passionate spirituality”. But I have sensed a surge in recent months. If you were to rate your own love for God from 1 to 10 (ten being the highest), what number would you pick right now? . . . What number would you have picked for the year before? As we all increase or decrease our love for God and others, so the church increases her love for God and others—for the church is people. The church is us!

Our Bible texts for this last Sunday in the season of Christmas (yes, we can still say “Merry Christmas”) point to what business GOD is in. Open your Bibles first to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, and find chapter 31, and verse 7. Before we begin, let’s set the scene for Jeremiah’s word from God. At the time of this text, Israel is in Exile in Babylon. She had been conquered in 587 B.C., and the best and brightest of her people had been taken to



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Babylon to enrich that empire. After living there for most of a generation, squeezed year after year to adopt Babylonian customs and abandon God, this word came from Jeremiah. Listen for God's word and how it must have sounded to those people, and also listen for what God might be saying to us today, on this last Sunday of Christmas. *[text]*

This is a strong word of hope, isn't it? For people who had felt abandoned by God, this word from Jeremiah gave those who still cared about God a hope of returning home--of being among those whom God would gather together, returning at last to Jerusalem and the Promised Land. Like water to a thirsty man, this word from Jeremiah's God was a stunning turn.

--->Mourning Into Dancing from CD start 1:08, fade on cue

Can you feel their delight, their joy? God turned the long mourning of His people into dancing. Has God done that for you?

From this text, what business would you say God is in? I think it's clear that God is in the business of blessing people who are faithful to the covenant made long ago between God and the faithful followers. God desires great things for His people—and expects great things from them. You remember when God first chose this people, starting with Abram's clan, He made a covenant with Abram that He would bless Abram and his people, and that through them God would bless all the peoples of the earth. “Blessed, to be a blessing” is the shorthand way of saying this. “Blessed, to be a blessing”. That's our call too, isn't it? Isn't “passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every one” the same thing, tweaked in the light of Jesus' life, death and resurrection power of His Spirit living in and among us? Yes, it IS! We are part of God's plan from the beginning. This is our calling from God. To bless is to show love. So, how much stronger, how much more faithful, do you want to be to this calling in the year ahead?

In our texts from the New Testament, God's blessing—His love for us—is expressed even more clearly and magnificently in Jesus. John, chapter 1, expresses this by identifying Jesus as the very “word” of God, “the living word” that demonstrates God's nature, God's values, God's position, God's plan from the start. Jesus—blessed, to be a blessing! Ephesians chapter 1 is another expression of the same truth. Starting in verse 3, the author seeks to paint a picture of “the Cosmic Christ” who is the hinge of history, the still point in a turning world. Listen for God's voice to us in this Word. *[text]*

From the beginning—before Creation—God purposed to adopt us as receivers of his glorious grace, freely given in the Lord Jesus Christ. And God has let us in on the secret (Paul uses the word, “mystery”) so that we might live in such a way that God gets the praise and glory He deserves. How do we do that? By blessing others with the blessings with which we have been blessed. “Blessed, to be a blessing.” As Paul writes to his friends at Corinth, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (2 Cor. 9:8, NIV) “Blessed, to be a blessing.” In Peter's first



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letter, he puts it this way—with an edge: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” (1 Peter 3:9, NIV) “Blessed, to be a blessing” also works in reverse—“*Be a blessing, get blessed*”.

Last week, in Luke Chapter 2, we followed Mary and Joseph, Jesus’ mother and adoptive father, as they searched in Jerusalem for their son who had not joined their caravan to travel back home, as they had assumed. They found Jesus, you remember, in the Temple, totally involved in discussing the Law of Moses with the smartest rabbis in the country. Mary and Jo were put out with their son; they had been so worried. But Jesus was puzzled. Why did you search anywhere else but the Temple? He said. Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house? (Some translations have it, “at my Father’s business”.) Jesus is learning the business—his Father’s business--from what God had said centuries before in the Law of Moses, and that starts with God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3—blessed to be a blessing. In fact, all the history of Israel—and of the Church, too in the rest of the Bible—is a record of how well or how badly we have stayed true to our mission, our vision, joining with God in what God was and is doing.

There was a moment around the turn of the calendar this past week when I asked myself if I had been a blessing in 2009. And to my surprise, I had to say, “Yes.” Some of the ways I blessed people they will not know; some, they know well and are grateful. For example, I have been a mentor to a number of young and middle-aged men; I have disciplined others. (I make a distinction, though they overlap.) I have done my best (though not always), to listen well to others, giving them my full attention. I have tried to be faithful in my promises of giving time to individuals and organizations, and have given them the best that I have in wisdom and experience. Sometimes my blessing is to be the first one to pick up a phone and renew an old friendship that has grown cold. Sometimes, I have loaned or given money. And behind each of these other general statements are also real people with specific stories. I hope, especially, I’ve been a blessing to my wife Sharon, as she has been a blessing to me.

This week, when I stopped to take stock, it was a pleasant surprise to me—a surprise, because I do not keep these things in mind, day by day. I don’t look back to when I have blessed; I am looking always ahead, for when I might be a blessing.

I’m a bit embarrassed to say these things—as I was embarrassed a few months ago when I confessed to the terrible damage I did to a relationship. I don’t like talking about myself here. But the truth is, “if I ain’t doin’ it”, how can I ask you to be a blessing? And of course, many of you are a source of blessing to others--which, when I get wind of it, makes me proud to know you, and glad we are in this calling of God together.

Your record of blessing in the past year might not have been spectacular, and you may not think it’s worth much. But let me share with you a word from a fellow named Bill White of Paramount, CA. He wrote, “Two days ago I was kneeling in prayer in the front room of our house at 6:30 in the morning. I’d just confessed sins and was asking God for a blessing that day,



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needing to feel loved by him. Our little boy Timothy, who is 22 months old, had just gotten up, and I noticed out of the corner of my eye that he had sneaked quietly into the front room. He's always quiet in the morning when I'm praying because his mom tells him to be, but this time he ambled straight over to me, put a hand on my clasped hands, and said, "Hi, special one. Hi, special one. Hi, special one. Hi, special one." Never once has he called me that before. Six times he called me "special one." He said it enough for me actually to get it--that God was speaking to me and giving me a blessing."

Such a simple thing, like a child reminding people of God's love by loving them. All it takes is a decision to be a blessing to others in the year ahead. It can be as simple as a child expressing special love for a parent.

Next week, we share an opportunity to renew the vows we took at our baptism (or, I we were baptized as infants, the promises taken for us until we could confirm them for ourselves as teens or adults). You have a week to prepare. Are you ready to commit yourself to God's business--our business--in the year ahead?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on January 3, 2010, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]