

“An Inkblot Blessing”

I bring a gift for us this morning,
The gift of transporting us to a different season.
Imagine with me it is late May, the tulips are blooming,
The air is filled with the smell of fresh-cut grass,
The breeze is light, the air is clear,
When you tilt your head back you see the sky is deep blue.
The buttons on your collared shirt are open at the top, you have no scarf,
You have no hat even, you have no gloves,
It is just you and your skin feeling the warmth of sun and light.
How warm is it?
Would you believe it is 86 degrees!
It is a minor heat-wave for New England.
Some were even heard to say the words that to our February ears
Sound like an insult, an indignity;
they were heard to say: *“It is too hot! Oh, it is so hot!”*

Imagine, on this warm late day in May that you are watching me,
Your minister, it is a Saturday, the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend.
I have the next day off, no preaching, no pulpit, no pew.
Instead I will take Ralph Waldo Emerson up on his offer and find God
Out in the natural world, behind the handlebars of my bicycle,
And then later behind the grill of my BBQ.
You’re thinking: God is in those places?

And I'm thinking: who said God is found only in church, anyway?

But before I can do any of that I'm on duty for a while on this Saturday.

I've been asked to go to a backyard in one of our nearby towns

and bless a baby boy,

let's call him Joseph;

His parents never having attended our church,

One of them lapsed Episcopalian, the other of them a faithful attendee

Of the religion I call "nothing much,"

Which is to say these young parents spend their Sunday mornings

cleaning up the yard

And trying to read the paper rather than in a sanctuary like this.

But they did want to acknowledge the arrival of their Joseph

with more than just a toast at the table one night,

Meaning they did want to witness his life as something like

A sacred beginning,

which was how they described it to me when they called me one day out of the blue

and asked: "*Do you bless babies who don't go to your church?*

Could you come to our home one Saturday in May and bless Joseph?"

I want us to know I get these calls all the time,

And more often than not I say yes to them

because I know that if I don't do these blessings

It is likely nothing will happen at all,

Because other churches ask parents to commit to the faith
before a blessing is given,
And because I know couples like these can't or won't make that commitment,
Leaving Joseph's family without a way to witness this amazing thing,
This miracle really, that is his arrival in the world.
"Yes, I can do that" I say to Joseph's parents.

So in the warmth, the heat of this May Saturday
I put on what my daughter calls my
'church shirt' and off I go.
And to be honest, it is actually pretty hot outside.
The tie doesn't help, or the blazer, or the stole I will put on for the ceremony.
I pull up outside their home, and before I go into the backyard
To meet Joseph and his 30 friends, family and neighbors
I take out the pen that I keep in the sun visor of my car
And I make a few minor edits to the notes that I will use.
Cross the 't' here; dot the 'i' there.
And then I put the pen back, remarking to myself how hot it really is,
And wishing I would have gotten the air-conditioner fixed
So my fingers and brow wouldn't be sweating so much.
I wipe my wet forehead with my hand, and then I go.

"Hi Joseph!" I say.

"Nice to meet you, Joseph's mom; nice to meet you, Joe's dad."

I meet everyone; I'm an introvert at heart, but in these situations

The minister's role stretches me and I'm practically a social butterfly.
Later I will understand better why I received some quizzical looks,
Including one from Joseph,
But at this point I'm just doing my job.
I gather everyone in the yard, I'm on the deck with Joseph and his parents,
I say prayers, they tell us how Joseph got his name.
And when it's time to dip my fingers into the water and touch his forehead,
his eyes, and his lips, saying: "*Joseph, may you be blessed in thought, vision,
And speech*"
It's then that I notice all five of my fingers are stained here and there with black.

"*Odd,*" I say to myself. "*My pen must have leaked.*"
And I hope I'm the only one who notices this, and I also hope I'm
The only one who notices that the water on Joseph's forehead
Is tinted ever-so slightly grey from my ink-stained fingers.
What do you do? They don't teach you this in seminary.
But what they do teach you is to keep going. The service must go on!
And so it does. And I give my benediction.
And I take smiling photos with the family.
And everyone says thank you, and I leave to go home.

Now blessing babies in the heat of early summer can be thirsty work,
So after wiping my hands clean of the ink
– oh, how embarrassing, I say to myself –
I stop off at the store to get a big bottle of water.

I go into the store, I get the water, more quizzical looks.

Whatever, I'm thirsty.

And do you know how sometimes you can see your reflection in a bottle of water,
Just as you are about to take a drink?

Well it's then that I see my face for the first time all morning.

I see my face with the 2 –inch in diameter ink blot in the center of my forehead,
The ink blot that I must have put there before the blessing when I wiped my brow.

The ink blot that I realize everyone was staring at for the hour that I was there

In that backyard, they not saying anything to me why?

Maybe because they thought it was part of the ritual.

The ink blot – oh no I realize – now immortalized in all the photos!

And yes, the ink blot that I blessed Joseph with, despite it all.

Why am I telling you this? Why is this story coming back to me now

In this February of too much snow, of too much difficult news in the papers,

Of a world that winters us with weather, and sometimes winters our spirits, too?

When I reflect on what I have come to call the “the day of the inkblot blessing”

These are the lessons I am taking here in mid-winter:

First, blessings aren't always dependent on our performance.

This is good news, yes?

But maybe with me you are tempted sometimes to believe otherwise.

There is a theology out there that tempts us into believing

That we must earn all that we have.

My colleague Gary Smith, whose sermons I am re-reading because he is retiring,

Leaving me without my preacher,
 Says that in New England “*it’s the mindset that says we must pull ourselves up
 By our bootstraps; it’s everyone for him or herself;
 We get what we deserve; God helps those who help themselves.
 I worked hard for these things – I deserve them!*”

All of which are sayings of a particular American theology, Gary says,
 that has us believing
 God shines light upon us because we’ve we’re worked especially hard
 And deserve the blessings.

But what happens when your perfect image is blotted?
 What happens when your performance is marred?
 Does your blessing mean any less?
 I feel like this is what little Joseph is asking me and us in my true story.
 Joseph could have cried, his parents could have asked me to clean up my
 Face for the photos.
 My ego wishes they would have!
 But the minister in me is glad they didn’t.
 Because we need, you and I, we who so often are taught to strive and want
 and earn,
 We who so often hear: *‘compensation will be commensurate with performance,’*
 We who are so often told by the politicians to sing “God bless America”
 while walking through our homes self-satisfied.
 We need stories of the times we can bless despite our best efforts,
 Not because of our best efforts.

And this is not all little Joseph and my ink blot are teaching me.
Go with me now back to that May day. I am driving home to my family.
I am embarrassed. I am early in ministry.
I have yet to learn how to laugh at myself.
I think I need to project 'that certain image,' I need to convey
What denomination officials call 'ministerial authority!'
But my son, then 5 or 6, disabuses me of this instantly. And my wife.
In search of consolation I tell them what happened
and immediately they burst out laughing. And then so do I.

"Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly," is what comes to mind now
These years later, these words from Bill Sloane Coffin that I repeat often enough
Because I need to hear them.

Does the world weigh on us? Egypt. Tucson. Immigration reform.
We heard last week about violence against gays in Uganda. Need I say more?
I am so thankful for a church like ours that is not scared
to talk about all these issues,
That asks us to stand up, not sit down, on the side of love and hope and fairness
And equality.
But how we do carry ourselves lightly in the midst of this serious work
And these serious issues,
Which is to say: how do we survive? How do our hearts survive?
Courage, yes. Prayer, yes. Dedication, yes. But dare I say it?
I will. Also, we need lightness. We need gladness.

We need to laugh at and with ourselves more often.

Because the work of helping to heal the world needn't make us miserable in the process.

Better to ask yourself: what makes me glad?

And then ask yourself: what does my world most need?

And then ask yourself: where does my gladness and that need meet?

And then go do that, in joy.

Speaking of joy, this last lesson from little Joseph and the ink blot.

That despite it all the world is good, so very good,

And here let us remember how our choir sang earlier to those ancient Words from Genesis.

Some days saying the world is good feel less like a statement of fact, and more like an act of faith.

And I can't help but remember that in that year of the ink blot blessing

There was also loss here, with several memorial services in this room,

And also loss in my own life, with both my grandfather and my wife's grandfather Passing away,

And also one of those mind-boggling disasters, maybe it was the tsunami in Asia,

Which taken all together make theologians out of us all, because we ask:

Why do these things happen? Where do my loved ones go?

But into those questions and those losses of the year arrived little Joseph

And by own inkblot blessing,

The ink I'm thinking now a fitting metaphor for the loss that touches me

And touches us,
But loss that little Joseph saw through or saw past somehow
As I bent down to bless his head,
my loss-stained fingers touching his new brow, his new eyes, his new lips.

I knew then and I know now that I had it backwards all along:
That I was not the one doing the blessing that day;
That it was instead little Joseph who was blessing me,
Dipping me once again in the waters of new life, new hope, new beginning,
New love.

O Spirit of Life and Renewal,
And now this is our prayer,
We have wintered enough, we have mourned enough,
we have oppressed ourselves enough.
Our souls are too long cold, our dreams all but forgotten, our hopes unheard.
We are waiting to rise.
In this season we love to awaken to the power so abundant, so holy,
That will return each year through earth and sky.
We will find our hearts again, and our good spirits.
We will love, and believe, and give and wonder and feel again the eternal powers.
The flow of life moves ever onward through one faithful season, and another,
And another.
May we be forever grateful.
Amen.