**Numbers 6:22-27** June 16, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Trinity Sunday

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Privileged Kids? Blessed Children!**

 You walk out the door. How do you feel? It depends on the door.

 Out the front door of your house to the camper in the driveway, for a trip. You are almost running. Maybe you are running! “Yay! Vacation.”

 Senior year, last time out the school doors you think, “It was great. I’ll miss some people, some stuff, but hey, it’s time to move on!”

 Out of the door of the dentist office, “That was not fun! And now, with a numb face and fat lip, I have to concentrate on not drooling in front of other people for the rest of the day. Great! Plus, do you know what it cost?”

 Walking out doors, different doors, throws us from one little compartment of our lives into the great wide open of the world.

 That’s what our reading is about. When you walk out the doors of God’s house today, God wants you, his people, to walk out with a certain feeling in your hearts. That feeling is conveyed in the words of our reading:

*Numbers 6:22The Lord said to Moses, 23“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:
 24“‘“The Lord bless you and keep you;
 25the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 26the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. ” ’
27“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*

 Of course, you recognize these words. You hear them at the the end of each and every Sunday worship service. These words which were spoken thousands of years ago have been repeated billions of times. Yet I ask God to bless our study of these familiar words of Scripture so that they become even more meaningful, more of a blessing to you.

**This Blessing Underlines a Relationship**

 Interesting to think that these words were first spoken in a desert. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, a rugged mountain in the desert God gave this blessing to his people. If you were ever stationed at Fort Irwin, California out in the Mojave Desert, (I’ve never been there, but I have heard a few of you talk about it), Fort Irwin gives you a general idea – except that the Sinai desert is a fair bit hotter and drier. There the Israelites camped in tents for eleven months. There God gave the so-called Law of Moses to Moses. There the Lord God declared that the Israelites, or as the King James accurately translates, the Children of Israel were his own people. *“Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* (Exodus 19:5-6).

 In the desert at Mt. Sinai the Children of Israel got the rules for life. They received the Ten Commandments, and rules about what they were supposed to eat, how they were supposed to worship; rules about farming and building and everything else. Then there were the rules about sacrifices for sin: animals slain, blood poured out, meat burned—continual reminders of God’s justice and his grace. You could imagine that after months of hearing rules and regulations from God and with the dark clouds and thundering of God on top of the mountain, some Israelites who didn’t listen very carefully would imagine their God as a grouchy God who only just tolerated them. So just before the children of Israel break their 11 month camp at Mount Sinai, our reading is just about the last thing God gave to his chosen nation. God wanted them to walk out the door of Mt. Sinai, so to speak, and understand what it was all about.

***“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”***

 How can God give all those rules, demand all those sacrifices, and then have these nice words of blessing at the end?

 Our relationship with God, like all deep relationships, is complex. Some people miss this. Their relationship with God is “Obey, obey, obey!” Others think of it as, “God’s is just permissive love.” But our relationship is far more complex. Our worship services reflect this complexity. Think about the different parts of worship: the confession of sins, the absolution, the hymns, the offering, the sermon, the Lord’s Supper. Each moment of the service reflects a different truth about our relationship with God. We cannot define our relationship with God by any single moment of the service.

 Let me give you an comparison. The first time I ever saw my now mother-in-law she had a huge tree limb in her hands, chasing hogs around the corner of a farmhouse. That was unsettling to her daughter’s date—me! It took me a while to get that picture out of my mind, but know this: That moment was the most out of character moment, probably of her entire life. My mother-in-law is a very gracious, sweet, and gentle woman who makes black raspberry cobbler every time we visit just because she knows I love that desert. In the 25 years since that day I have never witnessed anything like that moment. What had happened was that pigs had gotten into her flower garden—and she loves her flowers! How unfair it would be for me to characterize her with a moment like that!

 But think about this. How easy would it be for a visitor to misunderstand our relationship with God if the visitor left right after the confession of sins, “I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity.” It is a true statement. But it is only a small part of the Christian’s relationship with God. Think about what people would think if they leave after the first hymn: “I guess people round these parts like to sing about God. But why?” What if they left after the sermon? “Christianity must be an academic pursuit, a religious school.” If the offering were the only thing they saw, they may think of our relationship with God as a pay-to-play scheme. You need to take it all as a whole.

 The Israelites breaking camp below Mt. Sinai, could easily walk away from Mt. Sinai with the wrong impression about God. Just like happens sometimes when people witness our practice of closed communion, and think that we are just plain judgmental unloving people, when what is happening is that we are taking God’s words about the Lord’s Supper seroiusly. And so for those people walking away from stormy Mount Sinai with lots of new rules, God wants to make clear what the *sum total* of his relationship with them is. He wants them to walk out the door, so to speak, with these words in their minds:

***“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”***

 That is what God wants you to walk out of his house with every week. How wonderful to walk out of God’s house with those as his last words to you! Wonderful, isn’t it?

 That was how God wanted every temple worship service to end for his Old Testament believers. It is not a rule that binds us in New Testament times, yet God’s church after Jesus has looked at that Old Testament blessing and said, “Yes, that is how we want to walk out the door of church every week.” So, in our freedom, we also close our services with the same words the Israelites heard 3,400 years ago.

 It is how God wants us to walk out the door.

**Why Did God Want a Priest to Speak This Blessing?**

 As we zoom in closer, we notice new details, making this blessing all the sweeter. Think about this: Who was to give this blessing? Listen to the first two verses: ***“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites…”’”***

 It wasn’t Moses who blessed Israel. It was Aaron and his sons. Why Aaron? Isn’t Moses the big man? Isn’t he the prophet who went up and talked to God? Shouldn’t Moses be the one to bless Israel?

 This is significant. We can begin to unravel this mystery when we look at a parallel in our own nation’s constitution. Our constitution establishes a separation of political powers. There are presidential, legislative and judicial powers. The president, congress, and the Supreme Court, each have an area of authority. Outside of that they do not. In a somewhat different way God’s Old Testament people had a separation of powers between the king, the prophet and the priest. Moses was, for all intents and purposes its king. He was also its prophet. But he was not Israel’s priest. The Lord wanted his special blessing to Israel to be given through the priest. That was Aaron and his sons.

 The priest was the person who made Israel right with God. The priest offered the sacrifice for sin. Priests were the mediators between a holy God and sinful people. God wanted the one who made the sacrifice for the sins to be the one who declared God’s blessing. Then people would understand that the reason this blessing was theirs was not because they were such good and wonderful, or even nice, people. (That could not be it. These same people at the foot of Mt. Sinai bowed down to a golden calf.) They were at peace with God only because of the sacrifice for their sin. Because of the forgiveness of their sins, they would be under God’s blessing.

**This Blessing Is a Declaration, not a Hope**

 Another thing to notice is that the blessing is not, “*May* the Lord bless you and keep you…” The word “may” is not in there. This blessing is a statement of fact. For those in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the only true sacrifice for sin, there is no “may” or “maybe” about God’s blessing. God will bless you and keep you. He will make his face shine upon you and continue to be gracious. He will look on you with favor and give you peace. It is true even in the times when we do not feel blessed.

 Remember, this blessing was not something that Aaron was saying. It was something God told Aaron to say. Aaron was nothing more than a mouthpiece for God. And so, likewise, the blessing at the end of our services is not a pious wish from your pastor, or a nice tradition in the Lutheran church. It is God’s guarantee to his people.

**A Blessing for God’s Blessed Children**

 ***“So they[, the priests,] will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*** As you go out the door today, God’s name will be on you. He will have his eyes on you. He will bless you in ways that he does not bless other people.

 Doesn’t that sound unfair? That God blesses you his children in ways he doesn’t bless others? Doesn’t that sound like “privilege” in all the ugliness our age has loaded onto that once beautiful word. “Privilege” these days means that you have something others do not, and you should feel guilty about it. An unfair advantage. Isn’t that what God’s blessing means in practical terms?

 In the old sense of the word, “privilege” had something else to it. It meant that those with “privilege” had a duty toward others, a duty not beaten out of them by the mob, but freely offered. And so it is with God’s blessed children. It is ours not to surrender God’s blessing to other people, but to share the blessings we have to the world around us. And because we know how God has blessed us, we rejoice to bring blessings to others.

 As you head out the door of our church today, have the last words of our liturgy in your mind, the words from Numbers 6. Those are the words he wanted his chosen nation to have as they left that desert mountain to receive their Promised Land. They are the words he wants ringing in your ears as you walk out of this church into the world surrounding you—a blessed child of God. Amen.