

**You Will Be a Blessing || Genesis 12:1-9**  
**Rev. Drew Hanson || September 16, 2018**

**Introduction – Boyle**

This week we began a book study on “Tattoos on the Heart” by Greg Boyle. It was a great start to the discussion, and I’m really excited to continue through the book. If you couldn’t make it you are still invited – you can come into the study at any point. This week we discussed the introduction of the book, and Boyle tells the story of his career trajectory. He was offered a job at Santa Clara University, a job that would have offered certainty and comfort. Instead, though, he told his superior that he wanted to be among the poor and was placed as the priest in the poorest parish in Los Angeles. He made this decision because he had spent so much time among the poor in Bolivia that he believed he was called to life and ministry among the poor rather than among the certainty and comfort of a university. He learned so much about the gospel in Bolivia among the poor that he wanted to continue learning about the gospel.

I tell you this not so that we only raise up Boyle as this great person or hero, I tell you because this decision to turn down the certainty and comfort of a university job for the job he took has been a blessing to others. God blessed Greg among the poor, Greg followed that blessing in Los Angeles, and as a result, Greg has been a blessing to thousands. Boyle is a blessing to kids stuck in gang life, kids who were neglected and abused, adults who came out of prison unable to find work. And through his work, he has also become a blessing to me and others who read his books and listen to him speak. I saw him bless about 20 people here in Quincy, MA on Wednesday night.

## **Abram**

Today I want to do something a little different. I want to focus on telling stories this morning. These are stories from some of the heroes of our faith. Stories of God's faithful sacrificing certainty and comfort. Stories of God blessing these heroes as they sacrifice certainty and comfort. Stories of people who after receiving that blessing from God become a blessing to others. Stories like Father Greg Boyle's.

The first story we heard this morning was the story of Abram, who would later be called Abraham. Abraham, as many of us know, is the person God chose to begin the nation of Israel. He was the first patriarch, and his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, and Jacob's son Joseph, were all the foundation of ancient Israel. Abraham is also the father of three major religions, as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their beginnings to Abraham. Needless to say, Abraham is an important guy. The story we read today is the origin story of Abraham, a man who was from a different part of the world and called by God to make his way to the land of Canaan. God told him that he would make a great nation of him and give that land to this great nation. God told him this as a promise and as a blessing. God tells him "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you the families of the earth shall be blessed." But this promise, this blessing, requires sacrifice. Abram is required to sacrifice the certainty and comfort of home for the uncertainty and discomfort of this trek, of finding a new home among foreigners, of being the foundation of a great nation, with only the Lord's promise to provide him assurance.

God asks Abram to sacrifice certainty and comfort only with the promise of blessing. Abram knew that his life would no longer be certain and comfortable, but the promise of blessing carried him

through that. But God is explicit in his reason to bless Abram. “I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.”

Have you ever thought of blessing in this way? There are two ways that the story of Abram teaches us about blessing that we might not think of. First, God’s blessing does not always mean certainty and comfort. In the story of Abram, God’s blessing means that God will fulfill his promises and will be with Abram every step of the way. It didn’t mean early retirement and relaxing days on the beach, it actually meant harder work – leaving a nice home to become a nomad in an unknown land. In your life, how has God blessed you? Have you ever misunderstood God’s blessing because you experienced uncertainty and discomfort? When I was in high school, I thought I had the Christian faith all figured out. I was very comfortable, I knew God loved me and I knew I was set for eternal life, so who cares what happens now. I remember going to a summer camp, and thinking I was an all-star Christian, and then the speaker said this: “If you feel comfortable in your faith, like you have it figured out and you don’t need to grow and learn...” At this point I was like, yeah, that’s me. I’ve got it figured out. Tell me how awesome I am speaker. But he continued, “If you’re comfortable in your faith, something might be wrong or missing in your relationship with Jesus.” Hold on a second! I thought my comfort was a sign that I was in a perfect relationship with Jesus! But following Jesus should not be comfortable. We want comfort, but discipleship is not comfortable. Jesus said that, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” God’s blessing does not mean certainty and comfort. It may even mean the opposite, as in Abram’s case.

The second way the story of Abram teaches us about blessing we might not always think of is how God’s blessing of us transfers to other people. “I will bless you, so that *you will be a blessing.*” Have you ever thought about God’s blessings in your life that way? How have the

blessings in your life been blessings in another's life? How has God blessed you so that you will be a blessing? Or, do we think of God's blessings as something to hold on to, to hoard? Like Abram, we are called to receive God's blessing so that we can bless others. How will you bless another this week?

## **Catherine of Siena**

I want to tell you two more stories about some heroes of the faith who sacrifice certainty and comfort to follow God's call. Like Abram, and like Boyle, these heroes who left certainty and comfort to follow God's call became blessings to others because of that sacrifice. God told Abram, "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing." I think God said that to these two heroes of the faith, and I think God says that to us today.

First, I want to tell you about one of the medieval heroes of the faith, a woman named Catherine of Siena. Catherine was a mystic, someone who has mystical experiences of God, and thankfully for us, writes those experiences down so that we can learn. She was so influential that even though she died at the age of 33, her life was spent providing insight and advice to the Pope. She was brilliant, she was caring, she served the poor of Siena and Rome. But it was how she listened to God's call to sacrifice certainty and comfort, and to become a blessing to others, that makes her one of my heroes. In 1374, a wave of the Black Plague hit her hometown of Siena. Those who weren't sick fled. If the Black Plague came to Quincy, and we had the limited medical technology and knowledge of the 1300s, I'd flee too. Sorry. But Catherine stayed. She inspired a few others to stay, and she cared for the sick who were abandoned by physicians. It is believed that she miraculously healed many, and is believed to have raised some from the dead. I think it's miraculous that she stayed in Siena during a wave of the Black Plague and survived.

Catherine of Siena was blessed with a special awareness of God that made her a very important church figure. But it was her use of this blessing to sacrifice certainty and comfort so that she could bless the sick people of Siena that truly makes her one of my heroes. God says, "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing."

## **Bonhoeffer**

Second, I want to tell you about a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in 1930s Germany. You don't have to be a history buff to know that 1930s Germany was not the best place to be, as Hitler had begun to rise to power. Bonhoeffer saw who Hitler was, and especially saw how Hitler had been manipulating churches to buy into his awful agenda. Throughout his career, Bonhoeffer had traveled to preach and teach, and he was a prolific writer. Bonhoeffer saw what was coming, he saw the evils of Nazism, and so he became a part of the resistance. He believed Hitler would be defeated. He believed his part to play was to prepare German pastors to minister in a post-Nazi Germany. During this time, he was offered a job at Union Seminary in New York City. This was an amazing opportunity, and it meant he could do research and writing that would help the cause back home in safety.

While in New York, he began to sense a call back home. He wrote that he did not feel that he could escape Germany, be away from Germany during the hard times, and return after to help rebuild. He wrote in a letter to a colleague: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." He returned to Germany just before the war began. He left the certainty and comfort of New York. While back in Germany, he continued throughout

the war working with the resistance. The call to return to Germany from New York cost him his life. In 1943 he was arrested, and after two years of being moved from different prisons and concentration camps, he was executed in April 1945, two weeks before the concentration camp was liberated by American troops.

Bonhoeffer wrote a book called “The Cost of Discipleship.” I encourage you to read it sometime. It was one of the first books I read when I was discerning whether or not I should become a pastor, and it truly blessed and enriched me. He argues that God’s grace that we receive deserves our discipleship. You can imagine the impact of this book after hearing Bonhoeffer’s story and how he left certainty and comfort to follow God’s call. He didn’t just write about it, he lived it. And through his life and his writings, God made him a blessing to countless others. God says, “I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.”

## **Conclusion**

How has God blessed you? How has that blessing called you away from certainty and comfort? How has that blessing blessed others? God is speaking to you today as he spoke to Abram all those years ago: I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. There are so many other stories of heroes of the faith who were blessed by God and because of their sacrifice, they in turn blessed so many. But it doesn’t have to be a drastic sacrifice, you don’t have to fight Nazis or stare the Black Plague in the face. It can be as simple as putting another before yourself. A friend, or a child, or a spouse. It can be volunteering or donating a little more than your comfortable donating. It doesn’t have to be big, but look for the ways God has blessed you and is blessing you. Listen for ways God is calling you to sacrifice certainty and comfort. And remember that God blesses us so that we will be a blessing. God has blessed this church family, let’s now be a blessing.