



Did you know that in our Episcopal tradition there are only three things for which a parish needs an ordained priest? A, B, C: absolution, blessing and consecration.

Everything else can properly be done by lay persons. Since A, B and C most often occur within a worship service, this is one reason the priest has absolute discretion and authority over worship.

Given that lay people can be in charge of everything other than worship services, the Vestry is charged with responsibility for the

building and grounds and for financial matters. This is one reason I am so grateful here at St. John's for those on the Building & Grounds Committee, the Finance Committee and our Treasurer. I can forward your questions about those topics to someone else and not feel guilty!

Before we proceed, let's define A, B, and C:

A – **Absolution** is defined as the formal forgiveness of wrongdoing, or the act of being relieved of guilt or consequences. An example of absolution is being found not guilty in a court of law. The definition of absolution is also as a sacrament or religious ritual in the church where a priest grants forgiveness of sins.¹ We do this each time we say the Confession and the priest ends with the absolution, including the sign of the cross.

B-**Blessing** is a prayer asking for God's favor and protection, or when the blessing comes from God, as we will see in a minute, God's action of holding us to be of value. Merriam Webster puts it: a thing conducive to happiness or our welfare.² Blessing is often accompanied by the sign of the cross or by laying hands on someone.

C-**Consecration** is the solemn dedication to a special purpose or service, usually religious. The word consecration literally means "association with the sacred".³ For us, consecration means most often when the priest holds up the bread or the wine and says the words of institution. We do this each week at the Eucharist. We believe that the normal bread and wine that we hold up to become part of the meal we consume is made sacred by the act of consecration. Consecration usually includes the laying on of hands, which is one reason why I touch the paten containing the bread and I touch the chalice containing the wine when saying the words of institution: "This is my body" or "This is my blood."

¹ www.yourdictionary.com/absolution (Dec. 31, 2016)

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blessing> (Dec. 31, 2016)

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consecration> (Dec. 31, 2016)

This brings us to the question and answer found in our Catechism:

- Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?
A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Blessing of God's people is thus one of the foundational and most important functions a priest performs. It is never to be taken lightly since a blessing carries with it our belief that all blessings come from God, as the source of our life.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we use for our Sunday services, contains at least 605 references to "bless." They start in Genesis 1:22 with:

God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'

And continue through Revelation 22: 14 with:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

In between the first and the last books of the Bible we have among the most well-known of the passages, the Beatitudes in Matthew, chapter 5. Blessed are the poor in spirit; ... those who mourn; ... the meek and so on. Blessings abound when we remain in relationship with God, our creator, and when we exhibit the characteristics of life that help bring God's kin-dom closer to reality on earth.

Our passage from Numbers is commonly referred to as the Aaronic Blessing because God spoke to Moses, instructing Moses to pass along the words of the blessing to Aaron, the brother of Moses. Aaron was also the high priest of the Israelites during their time in the Exodus. Thus, Aaron played a special role in helping to keep the Israelites focused on the God who had liberated them from Egypt and the God who had called the people of Israel to be a light to the world.

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

We often kneel when receiving a blessing- such as at a wedding or during Confession. We are acknowledging that God is great and while we are a little lower than the angels according to the Psalmist, we are not God. Our kneeling is a symbol of our respect for God.

The Lord keeping us reminds us of shepherds who corralled their sheep into a pen to help protect the vulnerable animals from predators during the night. For Christians, this can also remind us of when Jesus speaks of searching for the one lost sheep- the one who escaped the safety of the

corral. The desire of the Lord is for us to be safe- to be kept close to God and within God's protection.

Having God's face shine upon us is a symbol of our importance to God. We refer to Jesus often as the light of the world. The one whom the darkness could not overcome in the prologue to the Gospel of John. Few of us can see well in the dark; there is no need to wander about stubbing our toes when we live within the light that God provides.

God is gracious to us sinners who are redeemed by the love shown when Jesus became flesh and died to show us how to live. God's grace is unmerited and not capable of being earned. All that God asks is that we accept such love and grace and live in accordance with God's commandments.

God is also the source of our peace. We speak of this when we talk about someone being at peace because they have gone to be with the Lord following a death. Peace that we give to each other when we acknowledge that all of creation belongs to God and we are the instruments of God's peace on earth. The Hebrew word "shalom" is often translated as peace. More importantly, it can be translated as wholeness and completeness. With God, our lives can be whole and complete. We are charged with taking the wholeness and completeness we have experienced into the world and offering it to those with whom we come into contact. Peace between us is so important. It does not require that we always get our own way. It does require that we respect and accord each other the dignity bestowed upon us as children of God.

The Aaronic Blessing, therefore, gives us a roadmap for our lives in relation to God and by extension to others. May we be like Mary, treasuring and pondering these words in our hearts until they become, as Paul wrote in Acts 17: the way in which we live and move and have our being. **Amen.**