



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# The Importance of Blessing

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 1:57-80

---

December 18, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

---

**Z**echariah had not spoken in nine months. Not a word. I imagine he and Elizabeth had worked out a system of sign language and note passing. But even with that, Zechariah had a lot of time to sit with his thoughts. After a long season of silence, his mouth was opened and he spoke. Because it had been so long, everyone—and I mean everyone—listened to what he had to say. If you knew you were going to speak and people were really going to listen, what would you want to say?

I learned recently of a letter written from the civil war battlefield by Sullivan Ballou. He was Speaker of the House for the state of Rhode Island and when war broke out, he joined the Union Army, serving as an officer. He was wounded, losing his leg in the first battle of Bull Run. When Union forces retreated, he was left behind. Within a week, he died. A few days before the battle, he wrote a letter to his wife, a portion of which reads:

“My Very Dear Wife: Indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days, perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines, that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield..., I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans upon the triumph of government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution, and I am willing... to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government, and to pay that debt.

But, my dear wife, I know, that with my own joys, I lay down nearly all of yours, and replace them in

this life with care and sorrows, when, after having eaten for long years the bitter fruit of orphanage myself, I must offer it, as their only sustenance, to my dear little children, is it weak or dishonorable, while the banner of my purpose floats calmly and proudly in the breeze, that my unbounded love for you, my darling wife and children, should struggle in fierce, though useless, contest with my love of country. Sarah, my love for you is deathless.”<sup>1</sup>

Sullivan Ballou was killed before she received this letter. She kept it for the rest of her life. I imagine he knew she would, so he spoke love. He wrote knowing she would pay attention to every word. If you knew you were really going to be listened to, what would you say?

We often talk in this room about how love in Christian faith is something that we do; it shows up in our choices, in our actions. But one of those choices needs to be to speak it. To say love out loud. That’s what Zechariah did. Zechariah’s first words in a long time were words of blessing.

The story begins in the temple. Zechariah was a priest and for a lifetime he had gone to the temple to oversee sacrifices and to pray. More than a few times he had gone there to pray for a child. But the sun had set on that dream. He was old now. Too old for fatherhood or so he assumed. But still he was in the temple to pray and to do the good that was his to do.

Gabriel met him there. Gabriel was an angel. I doubt he had wings and a halo, but he did have a message. That’s what angels are: messengers. “You and your wife Elizabeth will have a son. Not just a son, but a son who will be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah... and his name will be John.” Understandably, Zechariah is caught off-guard by this. Gabriel responds, “Because you doubt the goodness of God, you won’t speak until the child is born.” And he didn’t.

---

1 Wikipedia: Sullivan Ballou

The child was born and everyone wanted to know: What's his name? They assume he will be a little Zechariah junior. Call him Zechy. But Elizabeth says, "No, the child will be named John." "John? But nobody in your family is named John. We don't know anybody named John. Why would you name him John?" Zechariah (who still can't speak) could write and he wrote, "His name is John." And everyone was amazed. They sure didn't see that one coming.

What they also didn't see coming was that Zechariah—after a long period of silence—speaks. When a man who has not said a word in nine months finally opens his mouth, it's hard not to listen. If you spoke and you knew that everyone would really listen, what would you say?

This old man, now a daddy, has had a long time to think about this and he chooses to speak blessing. He praises God and he blesses his son. Blessing is the language of love.

I think there is a lesson here. When we speak and it's going to be heard, we must speak love. We need to speak blessing into this world.

Cultures are shaped by language. Sociologists speak of how language is the building block of any culture. And in our day, it is well recognized that much of our cultural language is not blessing but belittling, attacking, even mean-spirited. The language of the playground has become the speech of the public forum and it is hurting us. Grown-ups and leaders act at times as if free speech means we can speak without responsibility. But nothing is free apart from responsibility. This speech of smallness is hurting us.

Father John Jenkins is president of the University of Notre Dame. He once stated, "Civility is what allows speech to be heard."<sup>2</sup> I think he is right. Love is not only what we want to say when we know others are listening; love is what allows others to hear. So, Zechariah speaks love of God and love for his son. When we speak love, it can be powerful.

Marilyn Robinson's novel "Gilead" is a long letter from a father to a son. It is a letter of blessing. It begins, "I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, 'Where?' and I said, 'To be with the Good Lord,' and you said, 'Why?' and I said,

'Because I'm old,' and you said, 'I don't think you're old.' ... I told you you might have a very different life from mine... and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life.<sup>3</sup>

I will pray that you grow up to be a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find some way to be useful. I will pray and then I will sleep."<sup>4</sup>

The book narrates a letter of blessing written by Rev. John Ames to his son. Rev. Ames knows that he is dying so he wants his last words to be words of love. That kind of clarity often comes to us at the end. There are other things that could be said, no doubt. Every relationship has struggles, crises and brokenness from time to time. That gets said, too. But that is not often what we want to lift up when we know the conversation really matters. When we know that the words might really be heard, speaking love is a wise choice. Zechariah had a long time to think about it and when he gets to speak, he chooses blessing. It is a language of love.

And because he speaks this love not at the end of life, but at the beginning of his son's life, his words have the power not just to reflect on life, but to shape it. This is what I mean.

Zechariah spoke love—love of God and love of his son. Specifically stating that John would grow up to be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah, that he would lead the people to walk in the paths of peace. And that's what John did.

John the Baptist grew up to be a prophet; a preacher everyone wanted to hear. He told the people that which was broken in them could be healed. He promised that we don't have to be controlled by what we have done wrong in this life. That it is possible for us to change and tomorrow to be a new day rather than yesterday lived all over again. John proclaimed the power of love in a way that changed people. And he was surely afraid because the powers that be opposed him, and like the one who would come after him, he paid for it with his life. But even in the face of opposition, he stood tall—guided by hope.

The angel Gabriel said that's who John would become. But God has plans for all of us and we don't always follow through. I wonder if John became who

2 Cited in Blake Morant's "In Praise of Civility," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2018.

3 Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004) p. 3.

4 Robinson, p. 247.

---

he was in part because he had a daddy who knew how to speak blessing.

We read the words that Zechariah spoke when John was an infant. But I imagine Zechariah continued to carry these words with him and at times—probably the times that John needed it the most—Zechariah would remind John just what he saw in him and he would speak love. And I wonder if knowing that someone loved him like that is what gave John the imagination, the hope and the courage to become the person that God had called him to be. I wonder if John had the courage to spend all those days in the wilderness eating bugs and wild honey and proclaiming a promised day was on the way because Zechariah told him, “You will go before the

Lord to give knowledge of salvation to the people.” It’s the language of blessing; it’s the language of love. And it has power to shape life.

I have had some painful, mean-spirited, hurtful things said to me. You have, too. And because you have, you know how hard that word can be to shake. When the words of another injure you, you know how hard that can be to lay down. So, I think this is a path to healing and the path to peace. We need to speak blessing to one another. We need to let our love show up in our speech.

But we also need to hear it when it is spoken. We need to give room to those voices in our lives that have spoken love to us. Because the word of blessing can have the power to shape who we are.