

Blest and kept

Why and how I bless my children

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue



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My siblings and I have a special fondness for Peter Lutkin's classic setting of the Numbers blessing. We all sang it in high school choir; now we sing it together at family weddings and funerals and occasionally when we're just sitting around. Most of us know at least one voice part by heart. We're shakier, however, on the words. We know them all, we just get confused about the order. When exactly does the Lord be gracious unto you, as opposed to giving you peace?

It took me years to realize where this confusion comes from: Lutkin sets the biblical text out of order. That's a problem for us, because Numbers 6:24-26 itself lives even deeper in our bones than Lutkin's music does. This text's role in our childhood is both the reason we love the choral setting and the reason we're thrown off by its rather minor liberties with the text.

My parents prayed with us a lot when we were little. We were Baptists turned nondenominational, so we rarely used precomposed texts; the Numbers blessing was the major exception. Most nights, after we were fed and bathed and jammied and tucked in, my dad went from bed to bed, put his hand on our heads, and blessed us. He took his own liberties with the text by mixing translations:

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace, both now and always. Amen.

I can still hear his voice—his singer’s flair for the alliteration of “the Lord lift the light,” his slight elongation of *liiiight*, the way he landed on *peace* and then paused, as if having peace not just now but always were the icing on the cake.

I never consciously planned to continue this practice, but when my first daughter was born it seemed the thing to do. Now she’s two, and it’s an established part of her bedtime routine, something she reminds me to do if I forget. Not that she reliably appreciates the blessing—half the time she squirms and resists it, or tries to negotiate for a song or a story instead. Yet she’s decided that *peace* and *amen* are her lines, not just mine, and when we get to those parts she invariably stops fighting it and chimes in. (I bless her baby sister, too; that girl’s still all grins and coos.)

The first time I did this, I hesitated at the word *his*. Did I really want to establish a pattern of invoking a male God’s blessing on my little girl every day, exclusively? Maybe I needed to choose another translation. I didn’t have a parallel Bible handy, so I mentally flagged the question for later—and proceeded to forget about it each day till I was standing there in the dark with her, saying *his* again. The pattern took hold.

I soon articulated a couple of reasons I was hesitant to stray from it. I was eager for my dad to be the one to bless his granddaughter whenever they were together, and I didn’t want her to think he was doing it wrong. Also, I’m a big proponent of expansive rather than inclusive language for God, of making the list of acceptable words longer, not shorter—and I knew our family would embrace the divine feminine in other prayers, at other times. Mostly I just didn’t want the blessing to be any different from the way I remembered it.

This connection to my dad’s exact words is also why I didn’t like the idea of starting each sentence with the word *may*. In the world of higher-church Lutherans and Episcopalians I now inhabit, that would be the theologically scrupulous way for a layperson like me to do it: an ordained minister pronounces God’s blessing directly (“The Lord bless . . .”); the rest of us merely request it (“May the Lord bless . . .”). This is one of those things a lot of us speak of in a half-joking, mildly embarrassed tone. We know it sounds a little bizarre to Christians in less highly ordered traditions,

where the laity are presumably blessing one another willy-nilly.

We also know that the principle here, the priestly declaration of God's blessing, is integral to our theology and practice. And such principles matter. They certainly matter to me, a clergy spouse who believes deeply in my wife's gifts for her particular ministry "to bless and declare pardon in the name of God," as the Book of Common Prayer puts it. Still, they aren't the only thing that matters, and it's hard to imagine the illicit blessing of children ranking high on anyone's list of challenges facing the church.

It was not high on my wife's list. When our first child was born, Nadia was in the process of becoming a priest. I was self-conscious about the patriarchal implications of presuming the authority to bless my daughter by invoking God and "his countenance," so I asked Nadia what she thought. Did she want to do the blessing instead? She responded wryly that I should do it, since she wasn't ordained yet. Would I say *may*? she wondered, more curious than concerned. Probably not, I said. Partly because I read a lot of writing by pastors, which has cultivated an allergy to preacher tics like *may we*. Primarily, once again, because of my dad's voice ringing verbatim in my ears.

The grammar of a blessing, the gender of a pronoun—both *may* and *his* are three-letter words that point to bigger questions about, among other things, tradition. In my dad's church circles, a high value is placed on the heritage of exclusively male language for God—a heritage I see as mostly harmful. In my circles, there is a high value on distinctions between the ministries of layperson, deacon, presbyter, and bishop—distinctions that don't mean much in my dad's nondenominational context. These are both legitimate yet contested appeals to Christian tradition, two very different sorts of traditionalism.

Are they the same tradition? The question looms large for me. I bless my daughters because my dad blessed me; I'm carrying on a tradition in the practice of faith. And while such a blessing is an audacious invocation of the divine, at another level it's just one of many little things parents might do to try to form their children in something resembling their own faith. My parents' considerable efforts on this front have met varying results. Among their offspring, Christianity is expressed as conservative and liberal, high church and low, committed and ambivalent and strictly cultural. (There are a lot of us.) I'm the comparatively liberal, high church, committed one. Did my parents successfully pass their faith on to me? That depends

on how broadly you define it.

What I know is that I feel the gift of my father's blessing. Much of my spiritual formation and vocabulary were shaped by my upbringing; other parts were shaped in reaction against it. I don't think my dad consciously chose to bless both sides of this coin. I do think it happened anyway. Blessing is like that: it's bigger than our intentions, far bigger than our factional loyalties and opinions. My dad has given me no reason to suspect that our theological differences make him want to revoke or revise his blessing. But it's worth noting the biblical witness on this point: he couldn't do it if he tried. A blessing has its own power, whether or not the blesser agrees wholeheartedly with every word of it—or with what the blessed goes on to do with it.

In a time of deep anxiety about Christians' ability to pass on the faith, I've come to see the act of blessing a child as a gesture of trust. I'm not asking God to make sure my daughters agree with me on the nature of salvation or the priorities of Christian ethics. I'm not asking God to protect them from fundamentalism, decision theology, or showboating praise bands. I'm not even asking God to prevent them from becoming doubters or spiritual dabblers or outright nones. No, I'm invoking God's promise to bless and keep them—on God's terms, not mine. I'm acknowledging that they belong to a gracious God whose face doesn't need my help to shine upon them.

I do this using the words my dad used, whatever my quibbles about saying *his* and not saying *may*, because I cherish and trust the gift enough to simply pass it on as is. My two-year-old recently started helping me bless her little sister. When it's her turn, I bless her and she blesses me right back: though she continues to resist the thing, she also keeps chiming in on *peace* and *amen*, affirming these ancient and powerful words right through her ambivalence. I do the same.

A few hours after Nadia was ordained a priest, she and I were putting the girls to bed. "Hey," I said, in that half-joking tone we use to discuss rubrics and canons, "you can give the blessing now!" She just smiled and said, "So can you."