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Achoo... "Bless you."

You've probably heard this familiar response to a sneeze. Someone might say "God bless you," and often the one who sneezed says "thank you." Even those without a particular religious outlook may still utter this blessing in response to a sneeze, even to a stranger. Why do we do that, anyway?

Historically, sneezes were thought to be an omen or warning from the gods, according to W. David Myers, a professor of history at Fordham University. "For European Christians, when the first plague that weakened the now Christian Roman Empire around 590, Pope Gregory the Great believed that a sneeze was an early warning sign of plague, so he commanded Christians to respond to a sneeze with a blessing," he said. In ancient times, people believed that sneezing would allow evil spirits to enter your body, and saying "God bless you" kept out those evil spirits.¹

Some have suggested that ancient speakers of this blessing may have believed that a sneeze could expel your soul out of your body, so the words of blessing offered their soul protection. Although we may not hold this belief today, the blessing remains a common courtesy. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we

actually intended a blessing each time we uttered this phrase, even without a sneeze?

Although we have no sneezes recorded in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, his writing was full of blessings, for in one verse he offered three blessings: Blessed be God...who has blessed us with Jesus...with spiritual blessings. And he continues his letter by listing numerous blessings from God: God chose us, adopted us, offers us grace and forgiveness, promised God's Spirit, and more! It's like a shopping list of blessings, or a picture with blessed objects hidden in the illustration. If each of us would try to count the number of blessings in this passage of scripture, we might each come up with a different amount.

Remember that old song "Count Your Blessings."

Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

On those days when everything seems to work our way, we might feel like counting our blessings,

noticing what God has done in our lives. But when tragedy comes our way, instead of counting blessings, we may instead focus on our sorrows.

Isn't it interesting that one sorrow encountered in a day can seem to outweigh all the blessings? How many of us have become so focused on what's *not* going well in our personal lives or even our church that we forget about all the blessings?

One prostate cancer patient wrote in his blog that even in his illness, he found blessings:

I have spent the past year in the dark ark of cancer, and there is no question that I have become a new man. I've been granted a wisdom that only arrives at the rugged confluence of middle age and mortality. And I know, soul deep, that I have not been cut open, radiated, and tried physically and spiritually so that I can merely survive... Since my diagnosis — after shaking off the initial shock — I have kept asking myself, in the context of my belief: What can this cancer teach me?

The most surprising thing I've learned is that cancer can be turned toward blessing. Through the simple fact of me telling my cancer stories...many of you readers, in turn, have told your own stories. And that mutual sharing of our tales has changed my life for

the good. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Life is not meaningful ... unless it is serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else."

None of us would choose to have cancer. But getting this unexpected mortality check has deepened my appreciation of and connection to this life. Each moment holds out the promise of revelation.²

The song "Count Your Blessings" suggested that we might find blessings even in the stormy times of life:

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings...
Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings...
So, amid the conflict, whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings

Keeping a gratitude journal serves as one spiritual practice that can help us focus on the blessings in life by listing a few blessings each day in a notebook or journal. Over the course of weeks

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or months, while reading through that list, you might find yourself surprised at how many blessings you have, things you may have taken for granted that often get forgotten in our daily struggles.

How many blessings do you have? How many does our church have? Let's name as many as we can...

Rabbi Jennifer Singer at a Jewish day camp explained a time she invited youth to search for blessings:

Gratitude is an essential part of daily life. In fact, my tradition teaches that we should say 100 blessings every day. Which sounds daunting. Some years ago, I was the Jewish educator at our...summer camp, and when I said that to a group of third graders, one said loudly to his friends, "That's impossible."

I thought for a moment, then picked up a pad and pen, handed them to the group's counselor, and said, "OK, you're all going on a blessing hunt. Don't come back until you've made a list of all the blessings you found."

The kids thought I had lost my mind, but off they went, with the counselor serving as their scribe. When they returned and we counted, we discovered that they had found more than 100 blessings...

They found a turtle in the pond. Muffins in the snack room. Comic books. The swimming pool. Sunshine. Each other.

They realized that they were surrounded by blessings, if they just paid attention.³

This week I invite you to count your blessings. As you discover them, offer a blessing to someone else, even without a sneeze.

¹ Judy Mandell, "Why We Feel Compelled to Say 'Bless You' When Someone Sneezes," Sept. 17, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/well/mind/sneezing-sneezes-god-bless-you-manners-etiquette.html

² Dana Jennings, "In Cancer, a Deeper Faith," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2009, <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/07/in-cancer-a-deeper-faith/>

³ Rabbi Jennifer Singer, "Gratitude," Nov 2018, <https://srqjew.wordpress.com/2018/11/11/gratitude/>