way down here and God is not way up there. You are in God, and God surrounds you. Do not doubt that God holds you, and do not doubt for one minute that God loves you.

I've spent a good deal of time as a pastor talking with people who are on the outs with God. I've been there, too. No relationship of consequence has ever totally avoided conflict, and our relationship with God is no different. Luckily, scripture is filled with stories of people who go through rocky times with God. And what scripture shows is a God who is faithful, even when we're not. So though I don't know what kind of names you might be calling God at the moment, I wholeheartedly believe God calls you by name every moment. Fidelity and steadfast love are God's main character traits. We misunderstand everything if we don't begin there, especially when we're feeling on the outs with God.

We belong to God. That is the center of our identity, the ground of our knowing anything else. If we want to know God, we can only know God through the relationship God has freely initiated with us already. If we want to know ourselves, we start in the same place. Who we are, before anything else, more than anything else, is children of God.

We are people in relationship with a God who is sticking with it. Which is to say, we are all recipients of the gift of original blessing.

Blessing is God's Prerogative

When God spun the world into existence, all of creation was anointed with goodness. God bestowed this anointing, or blessing, before creation had done anything at all. We were simply blessed *as is*. That's hard for us to understand, because we are so used to goodness being connected to our actions. Think of the way we use that word in our daily lives: he is a good soccer player, she is good at her job, that was a good idea, they are good-looking. What we have forgotten is that goodness is both an origin and a goal.

Goodness is an origin in the most literal sense: it's how we begin. We have life only because God has blessed us with it, and when God blesses us with it, it is with grace and steadfast love. God doesn't give life in any other way. Original blessing is simply what happens when God steadfastly decides to be in relationship with us. That relationship bestows goodness upon us, and also within us. We are steadfastly and benevolently tethered to God.

Goodness is also a goal, because it's something we become, too. From our origin of goodness, we can grow into and live into the goodness God intends for us. So original blessing

isn't just a state of being, but also a process of becoming. We could say blessing *is*, and blessing *unfolds*. If we think again of the glass metaphor, the glass describes blessing as it is, and the contents describe blessing as it unfolds. Blessing unfolds only because blessing surrounds it. That surrounding gift is original blessing. It is unbreakable, unshakeable, indestructible. From that gift, a world of other blessings can flourish.

If we forget our origin in God, our identity and sense of dignity become reliant on the swirling, ever-changing contents of the glass. Those are stormy and uncertain seas. If we focus on our own view of ourselves, or how other people view us, or how we think the world perceives us, we will be tossed constantly from one sentiment to the next. Some people have a view of God that feels just as stormy, and that's the most problematic of all. If we can't trust the steadfast love God has for us, we will also be tossed around by our questions of whether God finds us worthy or disgraceful, whether we are measuring up or letting God down. But God's relationship to us is not in question. God is sticking with it. So we can find some stability even in the midst of our ever-changing lives by focusing on original blessing above all else.

We can either build our self-worth on the shifting sand of human opinion (including our own), or we can build it on the rock of God's steadfast commitment to us. Our connection to God stabilizes us and allows us the opportunity to flourish. There is no need for us to strive for something that has been right here with us all along. And we falter

when we believe we are working against ourselves, instead of acknowledging that we can work with God in our goodness. We can, because we are designed for it and called to it, and God's blessing rests upon us every step of the way.

When I was a junior in high school, I started to get the feeling that I was supposed to go into ministry. Sometimes we describe this as being called; to me it felt more like being summoned, and I wasn't at all sure I wanted to go. I spent much of my senior year pondering (and, to be honest, evading) this potential call, and I remember coming into the kitchen one day to talk about it with my mom. I told her I was struggling with the idea that this feeling of being called into ministry was legitimate, because it didn't make any sense. I didn't really fit in church, and I wasn't your typical church girl. I was loud, and opinionated, and I enjoyed debates far more than I enjoyed quiet agreement, for starters. I continued to list reasons. My mom continued to listen. Then she looked at me and said, "Well honey, if God wanted a girl like that, God would have called one. But God called you. So maybe God doesn't want you to change. Maybe God called you *because* of who you are." When she spoke those words, it was as if a hook snagged my heart and tugged at it. I had felt so much resistance to the idea of changing who I was in order to fit into ministry. I had never once considered that God wanted ministry to find its fit in me. God didn't want me to work against myself. God wanted me to do ministry the only way I could—in my own skin.

Original blessing means we don't have to believe we must work against our human nature to live with God. Our human

nature is not an obstacle to our relationship with God. Our humanity is the very reason we're able to have a relationship with God in the first place. Faith guides what we do and how we live, of course, but it does not ask us to diminish or vilify our humanity in the process.

A Circle of Blessing

If you look at the verb "to bless" in Hebrew, *barak*,[1] you see it used in three primary ways: God blessing people, people blessing people, and people blessing God. It's a beautiful description of blessing itself, actually, to see the blessing come full circle. We see how the relationship God begins with us is meant to send us out in love toward others, and also return us back to the heart of God.

Barak is used most frequently when God blesses humanity or creation. At its heart, blessing is an invitation into relationship with God, to abide in God's goodness. When we do so, we experience the fullness of life. Like I said earlier, original blessing is the proclamation that we are in a relationship with God, and God started it.

The second most common use of *barak* is with people blessing other people. When we live in relationship with others, we find our hearts turned toward one another in love. We bless each other. We don't do this outside of the blessing God has given us, but because of it. When we pray, we are

1. Some biblical scholars have mistakenly related *BRK* with the verb "to kneel," and even sometimes with the noun "pool," but they are in fact all separate unrelated words. See Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK 'To Bless' in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).

pulling the strands that connect us with God and the strands that connect us to the person for whom we are praying. The blessing hums in each direction. We can see blessing at work in the passing of the peace, too. When we extend our hands to one another and say, "The peace of Christ be with you," we are calling that person to a relationship with God that will mean peace also to others. When we say, "The Lord be with you," and respond, "And also with you," we are reminding one another of the blessing of God's presence and relationship with us. When we declare after confession that we are forgiven, we are turning away from our own shame and regret and focusing once again on the free blessing of God's grace. Of course, there are so many other ways we bless each other, too. When we lay a comforting hand on someone who is hurting, or check in on someone who is going through a difficult time, or share in someone's joy, we are connecting with the love that binds us all together.

The third (and least frequent) way the verb *barak* is used is in praising God, or calling upon others to praise God. We invite people into a relationship of gratefulness, a posture we see commonly in the Psalms. It's our way of saying, "Look what God has done! I am going to bless God. Come, join me!" When our hearts overflow with gratefulness, we find ourselves thanking God and praising God. We bless God, thanks to the blessing God has first given us. My children attend an Episcopal school, so they go to chapel every day. The church I pastored was a good deal more casual than the liturgy they hear at school five days a week, but we always ended our gathering by standing and saying a benediction

together. When we finished, my son nearly always added (in a loud voice, like it's his unspoken liturgical job), "Let us bless the Lord!" He first said it out of sheer habit, but there's a reason those Episcopalians say it so often. When we are sent out as God's people after we gather, we are called to bless God with our lives. God blesses us, and we send that blessing onto others and reflect it right back to God. That's blessing, coming full circle.

In all cases, the Hebrew scriptures describe blessing as part of the natural order of things. Blessing isn't magical or even supernatural. A blessing doesn't confer some kind of special power. It simply affirms a preexisting, primary relationship with God. Perhaps the most well-known scriptural blessing comes from Numbers 6:24–26, which says, "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." This is a blessing, not a petition. We don't have to convince God, because God has already decided to be a God of blessing, of grace, and of peace. Instead, this blessing calls us to remember the gifts of blessing God has for us, respond to them, and acknowledge what the gifts will do. When we rest in original blessing, we recognize we are kept by God, seen by God, and given peace by God.

Original Blessing Is Grounded in God

If you haven't noticed, original blessing isn't based on human action or some idealistic view of human perfection. It's founded on trust in God. So when we go looking for proof

of original blessing, we don't look to ourselves. We look to God. That's why, when someone asks me how I can believe in original blessing if I'm paying attention to all the problems in the world, I can say it's really beside the point. God has chosen to be faithful to us. That doesn't mean God is always pleased with the way things are going. It just means God's love is bigger. Original blessing is about who God is before it's about who we are and who we're becoming. It is the way God opens up space for us to dwell in God's own goodness. And sure, we are also surrounded by brokenness and sin. But God has made a sovereign choice to be in relationship with us. God has chosen to stick with it. If we reject that, we end up belittling our own relationship to God. If we want to respond gratefully to original blessing, we don't begin by saying, "But . . ." but "Thank you." When we rest in blessing, God's love for us can calm us even in the midst of the mightiest storm.

Because original blessing is grounded in God, it's not some shallow declaration of self-esteem. When everyone gets a trophy, it feels dishonest because the terms of the trophy are different. Not every child has the same athletic ability, or spelling acumen. To treat everyone the same based on a specific criterion feels like a gimmick. But original blessing doesn't tell us we are the same, or that we have equal gifts or talents. It tells us we are all loved, because God freely chooses to look upon us with love. Original blessing is a posture of humility. It's not a reward. It's our identity.

Because original blessing doesn't really have anything to do with our actions, or even our inborn traits, it is the great

leveler. We are just as blessed as a Pulitzer prize winner, and just as blessed as a high school dropout. A number of theologians have argued that sin is the great leveler because it equalizes all of us. As Paul said, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). And it's true, we hold that in common. But we could also say (and I think it's more reverent to God to say) that all have been blessed by God. We hold that in common long before any of us could sin. We are all tethered to God in the same love. So we accept this love only in humility, realizing we share this love and don't own it, and we certainly can't keep it from others. We are recipients of original blessing not because we are special, but because we are human.

So original blessing is not self-righteous. It's not prideful or vain. If we feel confident in ourselves because we are resting in original blessing, that's a good thing! A healthy self-esteem is not at odds with Christian virtues or faithfulness. In fact, it's just the opposite. When our self-esteem reflects God's love for us, we are in sync with God, not in rebellion against God. We will find we are more comfortable in our own skin the more we rest in God's steadfast love for us. Original blessing isn't an overblown sense of self. It's a *natural* sense of self, capable of reflecting on both our strengths and our flaws. Original blessing grounds us in a life with God, and in that grounding, we become at home in our own bodies and our wider world. We have to get rid of the idea that to be God-centered is to denigrate the self. When we are truly God-centered, our humanity becomes beautiful, not insignificant.

When we live into original blessing, we feel a deep sense of self-worth and dignity.

There's one last thing we should know about original blessing being grounded in God: we are not in control of it. We've been given freedom by God to respond to blessing in our own time and in our own way. But there's one place God draws the line on our freedom and says, "Here and no further." We can choose to distance ourselves, dissociate from it, cover it up, bury it, reject it, diminish it, and distort it. But I do not believe God has given us the power to destroy it. We can choose not to echo the blessing of God, but God's blessing will never stop echoing over us. When Paul said that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not life or death, not height or depth, not things present or things to come, he was speaking of the love that is at the heart of original blessing. The gift of love we are given by God is postmarked "Cannot Return to Sender." It is ours to do with what we choose. But the one thing we cannot choose is to destroy it. Because it is not ours to earn, it is not ours to lose either.

Only God can choose to remove original blessing, and God has never revoked it. Even in the most troublesome passages of scripture, God does not renounce blessing. God is sticking with us. There may be hard times, and there may be consequences, but God never says we lost our original goodness. *We* have claimed that. But God never has.

Three Reactions to Blessing

When people encounter the idea of original blessing, they tend to have three basic reactions: relief, anger, and/or fear. For some, accepting that the love God has for them is unchangeable and eternal is joyous relief, like water running over their parched hearts. My friend Laura told me a story of someone who, when hearing about original blessing, wrote in her journal three words, over and over: "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it." Original blessing is a deep truth some were too afraid to believe before, but when they give themselves permission to feel the centered gravity of the love of God anchored in their heart, they recognize it as having been there all along. It is not a rebirth, so much as a homecoming. And it is good to be home. It is a relief.

For some, though, God's insistence to love us without our consent can be infuriating, even insulting. What if I don't believe in God? What if I don't want to follow God? What if I didn't ask God to love me? Those are valid and understandable reactions, but we actually have no control over anyone who loves us, God or otherwise. We can choose how to respond, but we cannot demand that someone stop loving us. It is not our choice to make. You can choose to reject original blessing, and even the notion of God entirely. But if it happens to be true that God is the creator of life and God has chosen to love you as part of that creation, even your rejection of God won't change God's blessing.

For still others, original blessing brings up feelings of fear. Believing in original blessing asks a lot of us, and it can be

uncomfortable. We are so steeped in a world that asks us to doubt ourselves, to undermine our own intuition, to belittle our own bodies. Commercials and ads tell us this and, perhaps just as often, we are told this in our churches. It is a constant act of courage and defiance to believe instead that we are beloved. I wish it were easy, because original blessing is the most natural thing. But it can take a very long time to believe in original blessing if we have been told otherwise all our lives. It takes practice, and quite a bit of resilience to block out the yammering chorus of inadequacy that often resides deep within us. It can be scary, when we have become so used to identities built on shame.

It can also be scary because original blessing is incredibly freeing, and with that freedom also comes responsibility. What do we do without a sin nature to justify our choices? To accept the capacity of God to love us no matter what is also to accept our capacity for far greater things than we may have imagined. Scripture echoes this when Romans 8:31 says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" To be tethered and centered in the power of the unshakeable love of God is to be unleashed in the world as power and light. It can feel both awesome and terrifying. Marianne Williamson wrote,

> Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is

> within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.[2]

It is not easy to believe in original blessing. The reason we believe so easily in original sin is because it gives us a way to justify and make sense of our disappointments, our own failings and the failings of others, and the deep brokenness of the world. All of this brokenness is overwhelming, and we turn to original sin as if to say, "See! This explains it." But even if original sin explains it (and I don't believe it does), it cannot provide a way out of it. It produces only despair.

And original sin does not, in fact, explain the brokenness of the world. The pain and suffering we experience cannot be absolved by explanation. We do not feel stronger in the face of anguish because of a flow chart. If we say original sin explains the very deep pains in our own lives and in our world, we not only deceive ourselves, but we diminish the truth of our own pain. Suffering is incomprehensible. No explanation can help, ultimately. The only thing that can help is love, and grace, and togetherness. God blesses us with these in the act of original blessing, where we are anointed a dignity that cannot be erased and a solidarity with God that cannot be undone. When we are in the trenches of pain, we cannot always say that God fixes it. But we can say God is with us.

2. Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

Choosing Blessing

When we choose to live into our original blessing, we profess that God's love is the most powerful force in the universe, and also that we have no control over it. It's often difficult for us to believe we are loved so unconditionally. It is also difficult to believe that others are beloved. Seeing others' flaws is far more convenient and comfortable, and it doesn't require anything of us but judgment, which we're more than willing to offer. When we say yes to original blessing, we also say yes to our connection with all of creation, and that has considerable effects on the way we live our lives.

Blessing is an overflowing gift, but nothing in this world comes for free. The cost of blessing is to see the world the way God sees the world. In America, we falsely believe freedom means not having to answer to anyone. But freedom in God requires us to be committed not only to God but to each other. While society may tell us to stand alone to be free, God says we can only be free when we stand together. So while we're given a blessing that God chooses not to revoke no matter what, it doesn't mean God has no opinion about what we do with it. God has not created the world to be some sort of divine blessing free-for-all, where there are no consequences and no hardships and no complications, and an endless supply of get-out-of-jail-free cards. We live in a world of natural consequences. If we are destructive in our actions, our relationships, or our words, we cannot expect it to produce life-giving results. That isn't a relationship with God. That's extortion.

I believe God has designed us to live in harmony with God, with each other, and with all of creation. I believe the world is designed to work when we work together, and when we choose to do otherwise, the world suffers, and we suffer, and God suffers. The natural state of affairs is not meant to be brokenness and discord. But we are also free to choose how we respond to God. And our choices matter.

When we choose blessing, we try to live into the way of God in the world. That does require something of us, but it gives us so much more. In a word, it gives us life. We are most alive to God, ourselves, and others when we live a life of blessing. In blessing you receive your deepest identity: God has called you a beloved, blessed child of God. That is the core of who you are. Original blessing means realizing your sin is not the most important thing about you, even if the world—or the church—makes you feel like it is.

God has designed you to live in harmony with God and with others, so that your life may reflect the abundance of the God who created all. When you accept this deep and precious gift, blessedness allows you to rest in the active grace of God, which will forever go before you, around you, behind you, above you, and below you. Blessing allows you to look at the brokenness of the world (and within yourself) with grace and loving-kindness, rather than with shame, hostility, or despair. In blessing you find your calling and purpose, and in blessing you find an unshakeable home in God.

Original Sin is Unnecessary and Unhelpful

We can breathe a big sigh of relief that rejecting the doctrine of original sin is not unorthodox. Well, it is if you use the word "unorthodox" to describe something contrary to the usual or accepted way of seeing something. But if you're using it to label whether something is faithful to our most basic Christian beliefs, then it isn't. "Jesus is Lord" is our most central confession. "I am born with a sin nature" is not.

Since most of us have grown up with a version of Christianity where original sin was assumed, you may be surprised to learn the church flourished for four centuries without any concept of original sin at all. And if we look to the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, the earliest affirmations of Christian faith, nothing points to belief in an inborn, fallen state of humanity.

Of the three Abrahamic religions, only Christianity has a doctrine of original sin, and Christianity has never held this doctrine universally. Though it may seem that original sin is a given, Christian history tells us a different story. None of the Eastern branches of our family tree (Eastern Orthodox,