One intriguing storyline in this year’s NFL draft was when Ohio State quarterback, Justin Fields was falling down the board, as they say. Three other QBs went before him. The talented young man was becoming discouraged. Many thought he would go with the third pick, but he fell to number 11, where Chicago traded up to get him.

Upon being drafted by the Bears, Fields tweeted one word in celebration—no doubt through clenched teeth and tinged with resolve: Blessed.

Blessed is a word we hear and see a lot. There’s the vanity license plate with various creative spellings that all read BLESSED. It’s always attached to a Lamborghini or some other expensive car. Never have seen BLESSED on a classic Camry, don’t you know?!

My late father, George Sr, routinely answered the question “How are you doing?” with that one word: Blessed. And he meant it. Even though he lived the last 10 years of his life with multiple myeloma and endured numerous chemotherapy and radiation treatments, he always felt that he was blessed.

It would be easy for me to criticize the theology of blessing embedded in some of these examples and to praise others—my dad, of course; but they all have one thing in common. Whether you’re a young NFL quarterback, a successful businessperson or an old ship pilot with cancer, the feeling of being blessed contains gratitude for the sense that what you have has been given to you more than it has been earned.

Blessing is a spiritual term with a rich history in the Bible. Jacob wanted the blessing so badly that he deceived his blind father, Isaac, into thinking he was blessing his older son, Esau. Moses lifted up his hands to bless the Israelites at the time of his departure. Moses’ brother Aaron blessed the people with the words we used today in Leanna’s blessing: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make the divine face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up the divine
countenance upon you and give you peace. The prophet Elisha begged his spiritual mentor Elijah for a double portion of his spirit, a blessing that would help him carry out his prophetic ministry. And David wrote psalm after psalm blessing the Lord in response to God’s blessings to him and to Israel.

Our text today falls on the day we remember the ascension of the risen Christ. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, after his resurrection, Jesus meets with his disciples and commissions them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations. Then he leads them to the little town of Bethany, raises his hands and blesses them as he disappears into heaven. The disciples are filled with joy and return to Jerusalem, blessing God in return.

I want to highlight two things about blessing for us to consider: what blessing does for us, and what blessing calls for from us.

Blessing transfers the power of life from one person to another in a way so mysterious that it’s hard to fathom. We see this in children who feel the blessing of their parents and in those who don’t. When children grow up with the sense that they carry the unconditional affirmation of their parents, regardless of whether they deserve it on a day-to-day basis, they live without the need to prove themselves to anyone but themselves and God. The blessing frees them to live according to the way they are made. They aren’t looking over their shoulder all the time. They’re not competing with others as a way of measuring whether they are worthy. They can give themselves to the world and bless others with the blessing they have received.

Bill Glass is a former Baylor Bears and Cleveland Browns football star. He has a ministry to prisoners that has led him to one undeniable conclusion. The vast number of men behind bars—and I wouldn’t be surprised if this isn’t also true of women—have little to no relationship with their fathers. And for those who do, he says, they lack their father’s blessing and have looked for it in substitute ways that have led to criminal and self-destructive behavior.

If you are a parent, today would be a good day to consider your relationship to your children. Do each of them know your
blessing? Have you been deliberate in giving it, or do you think it’s your job to make them better through your criticism? When children are young and in your care, they need your discipline. But it should always be exercised out of the givenness of blessing, not with a view toward their earning it. If they know your blessing, they will more likely than not live out of it and live up to it.

The same is true spiritually. The Reverend Kathy Findley was the first woman ordained to pastoral ministry in an Arkansas Southern Baptist church. It had been a hurtful journey, but she had kept her head held high. Kathy was called to be the pastor of a grace-filled congregation, Providence Baptist Church in Little Rock. Soon after, a colleague she had overlapped with in hospital chaplaincy training began to attend the church. Steve and his wife had a baby, and Kathy asked for the privilege of dedicating their little girl. The year was 1993.

I was messaging with Kathy just this week about her memory of that. Here’s what she said:

_I was in a tender personal space when it came to creating safe spaces for nurturing girls and young women so that their paths would be easier than mine had been. When I looked at [that little girl] that morning, she lifted her head and looked straight at me. I was flooded with emotion and thought in that moment, “Precious daughter, daughter of God, you will go wherever life leads you, led by God to places you couldn’t begin to imagine.”_

And as this circle of blessing completes, my gift is that she has started that journey. As I watched her over the years, I saw her confidence grow every time she took up the offering, lit the candles or read the scripture. And I also saw several other things that would influence her life: a congregation that loved her and nurtured her faith, a father who was a brilliant theologian and minister, and from her earliest memory, she had watched a woman in the pulpit.

Kathy is writing a book now on the stories of 15 Baptist women ministers and their pathways to ministry. She asked that girl, who is now a 27-year-old woman, to contribute to it. And Jenna said yes. That’s Jenna, as in Jenna Sullivan, our pastoral resident here at Wilshire. Only God knows the power of that
infant blessing that has coursed through Jenna’s heart unawares all these years and led her to this place.

Oh, and by the way, Kathy is retired now and is a member of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia, where another former Wilshire pastoral resident, Scott Dickison, is her pastor. The circle of blessing continues.

But this leads to the second thing, this blessing is empowerment for a purpose.

Jesus didn’t just bless the disciples so they would feel blessed. He blessed them to be a blessing. He blessed them to be able to carry out his commission of them to bring the good news of repentance and forgiveness to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. He had led them there to begin with, and now that he would be leaving them, they would be going back there, and from there to the ends of the earth, without him. But they wouldn’t really be going alone. They would be carrying his blessing, the power of his life in theirs.

Whatever God calls you to, God empowers you to. Because what God requires, God provides.

Sometimes the very thought of what we are asked to do is daunting to us. We can’t see beyond our own power and the limitations of our past experiences. But when we say yes, the blessing of God goes with us.

One day, a man with leprosy approached St. Brigid, the beloved Celtic saint and leader of the early church in Ireland. Knowing the saint’s reputation for hospitality, the man said to Brigid, For God’s sake, Brigid, give me a cow. Brigid’s response suggests this man may have made a habit of such requests; though normally lavish with her generosity, Brigid told the man to leave her alone. He persisted. Brigid asked the man how it might be if they prayed that God would heal him of his leprosy. No, the man told her, I get more this way than if I were clean.

Brigid persisted with him, urging him to take a blessing and be cleansed. The man acknowledged he was indeed in much pain; and so, he gave in, accepted the blessing and was healed. So great was his gratitude to Brigid—and to God—that he vowed his devotion to Brigid and
pledged to be her servant and woodman from that day forward.

A blessing never leaves us unchanged. It offers us a glimpse of the wholeness God desires for us and for the world, and it beckons us to move in the direction of that wholeness. It calls us to let go of what hinders us, to cease clinging to the habits and ways of being that may have become comfortable but that keep us less than whole.

Friends, here’s the best news of all today: Regardless of whether you have known the blessing of a parent or mentor in your life, the blessing of heaven is yours. Be blessed. And be a blessing all your life long. Amen.