



*blessed*

Advent Small Groups 2021

Trinitarian Congregational Church  
54 Walden Street ~ Concord, Massachusetts  
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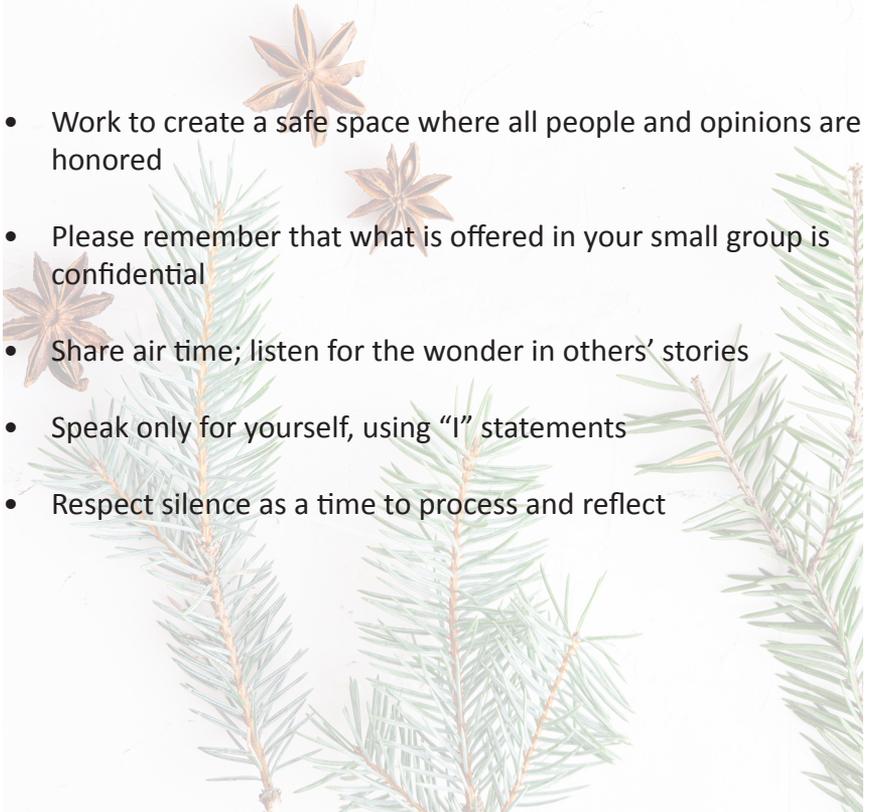
**TRICON**  
EDUCATION



## Advent Small Groups 2021

Monday	7 PM in person	Rob Freund, Parlor
Tuesday	7 PM remotely	Dave DeLong, on Zoom
Wednesday	10:30 AM hybrid	Polly Vanasse, Zoom-Room
	7 PM in person	Rick Olney, Parlor
Thursday	7 PM in person	Betsy Swaim, Parlor

### Guidelines for Participants' Respectful Conversations *from Allie Kussin*

- Work to create a safe space where all people and opinions are honored
  - Please remember that what is offered in your small group is confidential
  - Share air time; listen for the wonder in others' stories
  - Speak only for yourself, using "I" statements
  - Respect silence as a time to process and reflect
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## Introduction

Dear TriCon Community,

We are thrilled to offer this three-week series to you, the blessed, this Advent season.

Our journey will help us focus on what it means to be blessed. We will consider how

blessings can come at unexpected times and in unexpected ways, how challenging it can be to accept blessings, and, finally, how we might grow in our faith to recognize the ways and times we ARE the blessing.



Each week, we sing the doxology:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

With this hymn, we are not only affirming our faith in the Holy Trinity but also accepting that all the blessings we witness, participate in, and contribute to, flow from God. As we go together on this faith journey, prepare to explore your ideas about who receives blessings, who offers blessings, and who may overlook blessings. We hope that the conversations you have will strengthen your faith and open your eyes to a blessed world around us.

The CE Committee November, 2021

Leslie Ackles	Rick Olney
Liz Crowell	Betsy Swaim
Shirley Huettig	Polly Vanasse



## *To begin*

1. Is the gift of the Christ Child something you count on, or does it appear as an unexpected blessing each Advent?
2. Are there unexpected blessings that you remember from Advent/Christmas seasons past?

Based on a sermon by Dr Rev William Abernethy, Wenham Congregational Church Ca. 1995

It was Homecoming Sunday and the pastor of a large, active congregation was scrambling to get ready to go church. Gone, he realized, were the lazier days of summer with few burdens on his time. Sure, he loved the energy and enthusiasm that greeted him from the sanctuary in September, but in his 47th year of ministry (23 years at this church) he was finding it harder and harder to remember the spark that led him to this calling. Harder to find the spark for a new sermon. Harder to muster the enthusiasm for another Homecoming picnic – oh yeah, he'd need to remember to bring a lawn chair...

As the pastor grabbed his printed sermon, his lawn chair, and his windbreaker and headed out the door, he nearly collided with a man on the front walk. The man smelled – it was clear he hadn't washed in days – and his clothes suggested a life spent on the streets. The pastor was not in the mood to deal with this unsavory character this morning.

"Good morning, friend," the man said to the pastor.

"I'm sorry," said the pastor, "I'm just leaving and I'm in a hurry."

"I just wanted to offer to fix your window pane," replied the man. "I noticed it is cracked and I can make it better for you."

The pastor cringed inside; he did not want to be rude, but he

really didn't have time for this! "I'm sorry," the pastor said again, "I don't need your help and I don't have time to deal with this right now."

"There is no need for you to do anything," said the man gently, "I will fix your window. You will owe me nothing."

Not wanting to be any later than he already was, the pastor replied, "Fine, fine. Go ahead and fix the window if you want. There are apples in a basket in the garage if you're hungry. Now, I must go!"

So, the pastor got in his car and sped out of the driveway, not giving the rumpled man another look on his way out, nor another thought all day. By the time the pastor headed home, the afternoon was fading into evening and he was exhausted. As he drove into his driveway he looked up and came to an abrupt stop.

"What in Heaven's name?" he shouted.

In place of his simple 12-over-12 paned window gleamed a large bay window illuminated from within by a warm light placed carefully on the sill. And sitting on his front stoop was the man who had done this! The pastor jumped out of his car and yelled, "What is the meaning of this? I didn't ask you to replace my window with this large bay window! Who do you think you are? You had no right!"

"No," said the man, "you didn't ask for this. But I know your house and your life will be better with it."

The pastor was so furious, he stormed past the man, into the house, and slammed the door.

The next morning the pastor woke slowly. Every muscle ached as he stumbled out of bed and shuffled into the kitchen for some coffee. As he came down the stairs and into the living room,

he was greeted by glorious sunshine streaming in the new bay window. He quickly forgot his anger at the man who had done this and gloried in the new light shining into his home.

As he was finishing his breakfast, the pastor heard a knock at the door. Wondering who it might be, he went to the door and opened it to find the young handyman on his front step.

“Good morning,” greeted the man, “I noticed that your front walk is broken and rutted. I am concerned you might trip on your path and want to straighten it for you.”

“Young man,” said the pastor, “You asked to fix the pane in my window, to which I agreed, but you replaced the window altogether even though I didn’t ask you to! I am a simple pastor and I cannot afford to pay you for that work. I certainly can’t pay you to fix my walkway!”

“I do not ask for payment of any kind, only that you trust in me to make your path safe,” replied the man.

“Oh, fine. Whatever,” said the pastor. “But don’t do more than is necessary and don’t expect any payment in return. I am going to the church for meetings this morning. Don’t create a mess and be sure it’s done when I return so I am not inconvenienced.”

With that the pastor shut the door – not so hard this time – and went to get dressed and prepare for his meetings. When he opened the door again to get in the car and go to church, the pastor glanced around for the worker, expecting to find him lounging on the front stoop. Instead, he saw the man kneeling on the grass, head tilted back toward the sun, and eyes closed. “Well,” thought the pastor, “at least he’s not getting in the way.” And with that, he climbed in his car and headed to work.

After meeting with the church staff to review the budget, which appeared to need divine intervention to be balanced; being called

away to provide pastoral care for an elderly widow; and squeezing in a couple of hours to finish various reports and letters that had been stockpiling for weeks, the pastor quickly ate the second half of his fast-food lunch on his way to a deacons meeting. Bleary-eyed, the pastor pulled his car into his driveway well past dark.

Grabbing his briefcase, coffee mugs (one from today and two that had littered the floor of the car since last week), and the lawn chair left behind at the homecoming picnic, the pastor made his way to the front door and into the house. As he heated some milk and readied for bed, the pastor's head swam with lists of things he still needed to do at work. It wasn't until he was drifting off to sleep that the pastor wondered what happened to the man who wanted to fix his path this morning. "Oh well", he thought, "I guess he's gone."

Tuesday dawned bright, and early, and the pastor slowly made his way to the kitchen for breakfast before facing another day full of responsibilities. The warm light spilling through the bay window reminded the pastor of his brief encounter with the strange man the day before and he hesitatingly opened the door to see if anything had been done.

There was the young man, again, kneeling in the front lawn, face uplifted to the sky, eyes closed.

"What have you done?" yelled the pastor incredulously." The rutted, cement walkway from the driveway to the front door had been taken away and in its place were beautiful, natural stones, carefully cut and laid out, and planted with ferns, lady slippers, and lupines, so as to create the effect of walking through a streambed – only it was smooth, elegant, and, well, perfect.

"You were just going to fix my rutted, uneven path so I would not trip when walking. I did not ask for anything so grand. Now I have to worry about tending it; where will I find the time?"

"The new pathway I laid out is for your safety and pleasure.

Walking that path and stopping to tend the flowers will bring you both peace and security,” said the man.

Shaking his head in disbelief, the pastor went back inside. A few hours later, there was a knock at the door. The pastor whipped open the door and started, “What do you want?” But he stopped short when he saw not just the man, who had become steadfast in his care for the pastor and his home, but a group of men and women standing outside. What could this possibly mean?

“Good afternoon,” said the man. “I see that the apple tree next to the driveway could use some pruning and we thought we’d tend to it for you.”

“Who are all these people?” asked the pastor, ignoring the offer of more help.

“These people,” said the man, “follow my lead and, like me, lend help and support to others. They will all help with the pruning.”

The pastor put his head in his hands and slumped his shoulders. “I don’t suppose you’d all just go away and leave me alone,” he sighed.

“You’ll never be alone again,” said the man. And the group moved off toward the apple tree to prune its weary branches and bring it back to abundant life.

The pastor went into his study, pulled down the shades, and set to work on this week’s sermon. Frustrated with this stranger in his midst, and now his small army of followers, the pastor could not think of anything uplifting nor positive to share with his congregation.

After several hours of failed attempts at a sermon, the pastor rose from his chair and headed to the kitchen for some milk and

cookies, left over from the picnic, to try to lighten his mood. Opening the door of his study, he was aware of an unusual light – reddish, glowing, warm, comforting. He went down the hall and gazed out the now accepted, and much-loved, bay window. The new walkway – so smooth and fitting as to have become almost unnoticed – now wove, not through dying crabgrass and decaying mushroom tops, but a garden full of red-leaved sugar maples, strong evergreens, and delicate cherry trees. The rumpled man and his gaggle of helpers were nowhere to be seen. The pastor stopped in his tracks – and wept.



The pastor was humbled. The window, the pathway, the garden – all these things he had been given without asking for them and without owing anything in return. These changes were not the burden he’d originally seen them to be; they were blessings that he had been too busy, too tired, and too lost to recognize.

“I am ready, now,” thought the pastor. “With these blessings, I am renewed.”

And so, the pastor returned to his study, threw open the shades, and wrote his sermon – about a disaffected pastor, an unexpected visitor, and the blessings we often don't know we're getting and often don't realize we need.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. Find the phrases in the sermon that reveal the unexpected about the workman and the pastor. When did you discover the identity of the workman?
2. Can you think of a time you were given something without asking and without the expectation of owing anything in return? How did you respond?
3. Conversely, have you offered something without any expectation of something in return? Was the recipient able to accept your blessing in the spirit with which it was given?
4. Are you more comfortable giving or receiving unexpected blessings?
5. What do you think the man was telling the pastor when he said “ you will never be alone again”?

### *Scripture: Luke 6:38* (New English Translation)

“Give, and it will be given to you: A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you use will be the measure you receive.”

### *Dig Deeper*

1. Do blessings depend on your prior actions, your receptiveness, or something else?
2. Does this verse seem to suggest something different from what the pastor experienced? What was the pastor's “measure”?
3. What are your hopes this season? Are you prepared for the unexpected blessings that will come?

*Closing blessing: Numbers 6:24-26*

*The Lord bless you, and keep you;*

*The Lord cause His face to shine on you,*

*And be gracious to you;*

*The Lord lift up His face to you,*

*And give you peace.'*

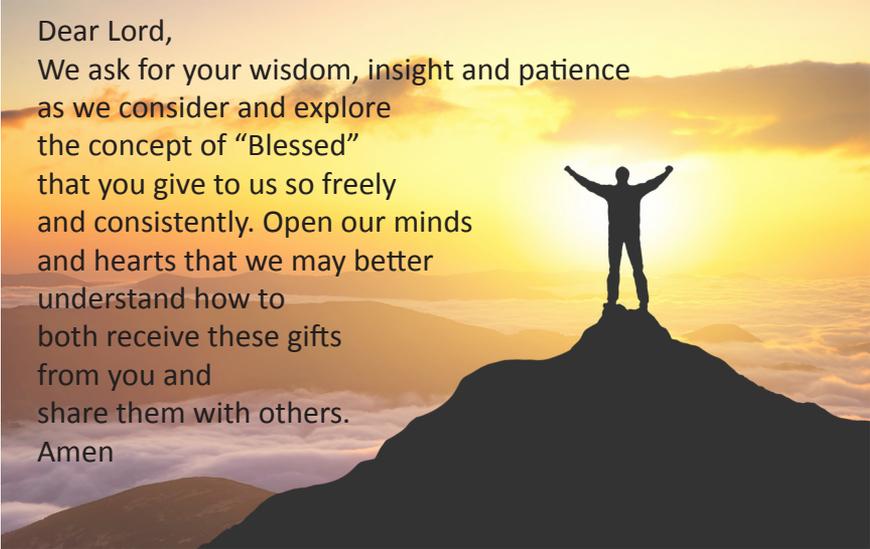


*Notes*

# Notes

## Chapter Two: Accept the Blessing

### *Prayer*



Dear Lord,  
We ask for your wisdom, insight and patience  
as we consider and explore  
the concept of “Blessed”  
that you give to us so freely  
and consistently. Open our minds  
and hearts that we may better  
understand how to  
both receive these gifts  
from you and  
share them with others.  
Amen

### *To Begin*

What image(s) or thought(s) comes to mind when you hear the words “bless” and “blessed”?

### *Save This Blessing*

By Margaret Ernst

(Formatting has been altered from original)

“Save this blessing for when you most need it.  
For loneliness. For fear.

Save this blessing for exhaustion. For anxiety. For crisis.

Save this blessing for when you feel torn between worlds,  
between longings, for when you’re caught in the crossfire and  
when you feel you cannot breathe.

Save this blessing for when you feel the world you are birthing with your bare hands is not coming fast enough.

Most importantly: save this blessing for when you think the last thing you deserve is a blessing. For when the right words are not coming. For when you want to quit. And when the work feels like it is never enough and that it will not save you.

Save it because this blessing refuses to believe the worst things you say about yourself, the worst things anyone has ever said about you, and refuses to let either have the final word.

This blessing will not try to fix you, or silence you, or make you into something you are not. It will not whisper false hope or have the answers. But it will breathe by your side. Here is what the blessing knows: that you are needed, and that your people need you. And that if you haven't found your people yet, or lose them, they can always be regrown.

In other words let this blessing be a safe house. Let it be a dream. Let it be laughs that slip through the cracks. Let it be dancing. Let it be another start. Let it be the tap on your shoulder helping you to remember you do not have to do anything alone."

### *Discussion Questions*

1. When do you most need a blessing?
2. How do you get it? (from where, from whom?)
3. What are some challenges to accepting blessings?
4. How do you react when someone offers you a blessing?
5. How do you know when someone else needs a blessing?
6. What insights do you gain from Margaret Ernst's reading?

## *The Beatitudes*

The Bible is full of references to bless, blessing, blessed etc. Most familiar, perhaps, are the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), which happened early in Jesus' ministry. It is his longest sermon in the New Testament and one of the most widely covered and analyzed. The first 12 sections of the Beatitudes are blessings directed towards the groups of people as listed below.



“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for

they will be called the sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

## *Dig Deeper*

1. Do you see a relationship between Margaret Ernst's blessing and the Beatitudes?
2. Who are the people asked to accept these blessings? What is special about these folks and why are they singled out?
3. Do any of these blessings appear exclusionary? challenging? easier for you to accept?

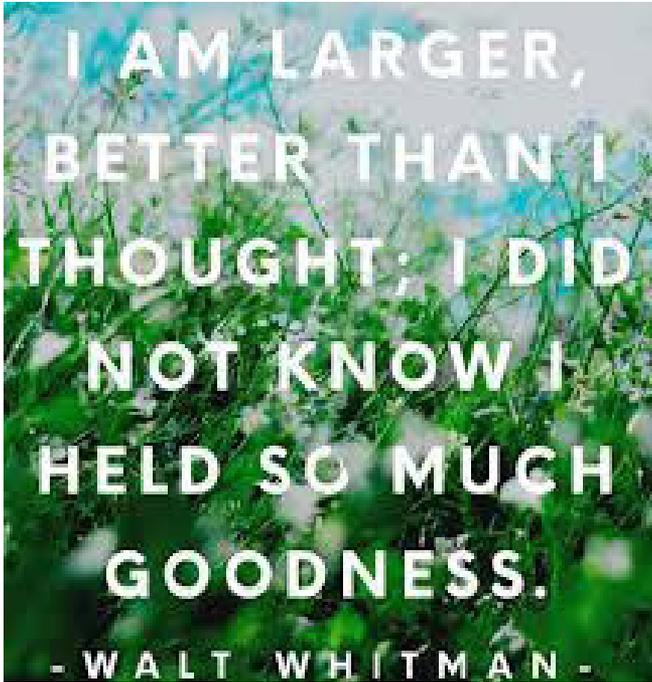
*Closing Prayer- from an Apache blessing*

“May the sun bring you new energy by day, may the moon softly restore you by night, may the rain wash away your worries, may the breeze blow new strength into your being, may you walk gently through the world and know its beauty all the days of your life.”

*Notes*

## Chapter Three: Be the Blessing

### *Opening Prayer*



I am larger, better than I thought,  
I did not know I held so much goodness.  
All seems beautiful to me,  
I can repeat over to men and women You have done such good to  
me I would do the same to you,  
I will recruit for myself and you as I go,  
I will scatter myself among men and women as I go,  
I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them,  
Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me,  
Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me.  
Walt Whitman

In this season of anticipation, it is easy and even fitting to await the blessing of Christ into our lives. We know that the anticipation of Jesus and His arrival fills the advent season. The promise of His blessing is a large part of the Christmas story. When the young Mary visits Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, she is told by Elizabeth, **"You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"** When the shepherds return to Bethlehem after bearing witness to the reality of Jesus, they can hardly wait to tell of this amazing thing.



Thomas Merton believed that the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth contained the heart of Christianity. He wrote:

“Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.”

Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 140-142, Doubleday:1966.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. How could Elizabeth’s blessing of Mary and their meeting be considered a “blessing of the season”?
2. When Merton says part of blessing is seeing each other as we are, he believes it would lead to peace and the end of hatred. Do you believe this?
3. How can you help others see you as you are -- a blessing to the world?

### *Final Prayer*

Matins (blessing poem by John O’Donohue)

Somewhere, out at the edges, the night  
Is turning and the waves of darkness  
Begging to brighten the shore of dawn.

The heavy dark falls back to earth  
And the freed air goes wild with light,  
The heart fills with fresh, bright breath  
And thoughts stir to give birth to colour.

I arise today

In the name of Silence,  
Womb of the Word,  
In the name of Stillness,  
Home of Belonging,  
In the name of the Solitude  
Of the Soul and the Earth.

I arise today

Blessed by all things,  
Wings of breath,  
Delight of eyes,  
Wonder of whisper,  
Intimacy of touch,  
Eternity of soul,  
Urgency of thought,  
Miracle of health,  
Embrace of God.

May I live this day

Compassionate of heart,  
Clear in word,  
Gracious in awareness,  
Courageous in thought,  
Generous in love.



## *Notes*

Thanks to the Christian Education Committee for authoring this booklet and providing the Small Group Series.

Special thanks to Amy Bruning for making our work into a beautiful booklet and creating the sign ups.



God bless us,  
every one!

~Dickens