

What does it mean "to bless"?

The late liturgical scholar Thomas Talley had a gift for getting to the center of things. "To bless something is to say something nice to God about it," he said simply.

Historically the church has blessed *people* (soldiers going to war, sailors going to sea, newborn babies, adopted children, birthday anniversaries). The church has also blessed *things* (houses, animals, ships, fields, hunts, liturgical appointments).

Blessings are part of the church's *non-sacramental rites of pastoral care*. Unlike the Prayer Book sacraments, their use often has a local flavor. A farming community might have a blessing of the fields; a fishing community, the blessing of the fleet; the British gentry the blessing of the hunt. Blessings often occur in the context of family or personal pastoral needs.

Pastoral blessings are very different from sacramental rites such as marriage. Changes in sacramental rites usually require authorized trial use and the concurrent actions of two successive General Conventions (General Convention meets every three years.) The blessing of a same-gender life-long union is a pastoral rite, not a sacramental rite. Pastoral blessings typically do not require General Convention authority. The diocesan Bishop is the chief liturgical officer for a diocese and, when necessary, exercises authority over local rites of blessing. Same-gender marriage is illegal in Arkansas and is not authorized anywhere in the Episcopal Church.

When the church chooses to bless it is doing several things.

- Whenever we bless anything we begin with thanksgiving.
- We are saying this person or thing is a gift and blessing from God.
- We are saying that blessing assists us in our living in a covenant relationship with God and all creation; our living in covenant is to bless God in return.
- To pronounce God's blessing is to say that something is to function for the good.
- To bless is to make something "holy," which means "set apart" / devoted to God.
- Blessing asks God's protection and favor.

In summary: To bless a union is to ask God to make it an experience of Christ's love, both for the couple and also for all who are touched by their life together. It is to wish good for this union and to give thanks for it. Most especially, it is to set aside this union for a holy use, to see it to be grace-bearing, and to expect God to use it.

Adapted from the work of two former liturgy professors now Bishops, Paul Marshall and Neil Alexander, and the Rev. Scott Benhase.

Addendum: The General Convention has also described some values that the Church expects of those who live in a life-long relationship: *fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.*