

Beloved & Baptized: Now What? (Gifts)

4th Sunday after Epiphany - Communion Sunday - February 1, 2009, Leonard Eberhart
Isaiah 55: 1-9; Psalm 63: 1-8; I Corinthians 10: 1-13; Luke 13: 1-9

Idalia, a member of a congregation in Texas, wasn't an easy person to be around because she was in a word, crotchety. She had a tendency to see the proverbial glass half empty. Even her grown children found it difficult to visit her. The pastor of the congregation was faithful in calling on Idalia, but it wasn't a task he relished. Always, as he approached her front door, he set the alarm on his watch to go off in one hour. With her, it seemed that he was simply putting in his time. Idalia was 90 years old and hadn't been to worship in years. In the pastor's previous visits, he had never noticed the greenhouse that extended beyond the back wall of Idalia's home. This time, sitting in a different chair in the living room, Idalia's huge ivy plants caught his eye.

He said, "I never noticed your greenhouse before. The plants are remarkable!"

"Well, you're always in such a rush to get our here; you probably haven't noticed a lot of things."

The pastor winced because her statement had a ring of truth to it. Suddenly, he had an idea. Every Sunday after worship services, members of his congregation delivered a small plant to the home of first time visitors. "Idalia," he asked, "would you be willing to give us some of your beautiful ivy to share with those who visit our church for the first time?"

"No." she answered.

"What are you going to do with them? You have so many."

"I'll just throw 'em out when they die," she said.

After some coaxing, she reluctantly agreed to give her pastor a few plants to share just this one time. The following Sunday, he personally delivered the ivy to first time visitors. While making deliveries, he told the people about Idalia and asked them if they were so inclined to express their thanks to her.

A week later, Idalia showed up for worship! She was all smiles. People who hadn't seen her in years greeted her, hugged her, and welcomed her back. That was just the beginning. Idalia continued to grow the ivy for the first time visitors of Colonial Hills Church. When, eighteen months later, Idalia was asked to share her testimony in church, she stood in front of the congregation and said, "I became a Christian at age 90 when someone taught me that it's better to give than receive." She continued, "Life has got to be recycled. Everything we get has to be passed on to someone else."¹

Idalia's testimony offers a powerful picture of what it means to be a faithful steward. While she was admittedly a "slow learner" and it took her all of 90 years to grasp the lesson, Idalia came to understand that her

¹"Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC", p. 19

gift of a green thumb was not given to her for her enjoyment only. Her gifts were meant to be shared. She was blessed to be a blessing. Before she learned this important, life-changing truth, Idalia lived with a shriveled spirit. Once she understood the joy of giving, her soul itself flourished like a well tended garden.

God's economy doesn't work like ours. In our economy, we get by grasping. We cling in order to possess. We accumulate in order to feel safe and secure. In God's economy, those who give, receive. Those who cling to what they have, lose what they have. Those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, find life abundant. (Mark 8:35) In God's economy, giving does not diminish us - it enriches our lives. Giving transforms shriveled spirits into expansive ones. Giving fills life with abundant meaning and purpose. (John 10:10)

Today I'm continuing a five part sermon series on the five expressions of our membership covenant. I'm convinced that unless we give thoughtful, prayerful attention to the promise we've made, we are less likely to take the covenant seriously. The promise we make is to "support the ministry of the UMC through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness" (you may remember, this fifth dimension was added at the last General Conference). So today we'll spend some time to consider "gifts".

The reference to "gifts" in our membership vows is often exclusively thought of in terms of financial giving. While financial stewardship is important, the full realization of stewardship is most meaningful when it is a response growing out of our spiritual life and practice. The appropriate beginning point is to recognize that our spiritual gifts are included in our DNA, embedded in our spirit. Once these gifts are fully recognized for what they are, then the use of them including our financial stewardship becomes a joy filled, outflowing expression of thanks and appreciation to God.

The full dimension of Christian Stewardship does include how we think about and use our money, but also our abilities, time, skills, passions, bodies, rivers and streams, minds - our very lives entrusted to us by God. The intended use of these gifts is to help bring about God's reign on earth. We fail to be good stewards when we resist or ignore God's intention of using our gifts to fulfill this goal of bringing about God's reign among us. When we use our God given gifts as intended, life flourishes and we honor God.

The Dead Sea in Israel receives fresh water from Galilee, but it doesn't send it on. The result is literally a "dead sea". It cannot sustain life. Other bodies of water receive fresh water and send it on - life flourishes. The same principle applies to us. When gifts flow to us but do not flow beyond us to others, death is the result. When gifts flow to us and through us to others, we experience the abundant life that Jesus came to bring.²

If we've been blessed in such rich ways, why then is our track record of receiving and using our spiritual gifts so poor? St. Paul's letter today gives us some clues. He points back to the time of Moses when the people

²-"Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC", p. 20

were snagged by idolatry, sexual immorality, impatience and complaining. (I Corinth 10: 7-10) 1 John 2:16 sums up the “Big Three” that have plagued all of humanity: “*the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of riches.*” Satan’s game plan is tiresome and repetitiously boring. Call it what you want, it boils down to the Big Three: Passion, Position, Possession; Sex, Power, Money; Sensuality, Status, Salary; to feel, to have, to be. Adam, David and Jesus were confronted by the Big Three as are we. The problem is while the Big Three are boringly repetitious, they work!

Although there are many forces at work, we have to be very clear about the difference between sin and temptation. Jesus was tempted, but without sin. It’s possible to live that way. There are at least two reasons to have hope. 1. God is faithful. The Divine presence accompanies us and doesn’t just leave us on our own. 2.

God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to resist. Our Eternal Provider will not allow a “no-win” situation. One of the extreme examples of this is the story of the temptations of Job who lost everything, short of his life.

In baptism we’re assured that just as we’ve been created in the Divine image we are continuously loved, unconditionally. With such a gift a “devil made me do it” argument for our unfaithfulness doesn’t cut it. It boils down to choice: will I yield to temptation or not? Will I use God’s gifts in my life as intended or not? God has provided the way for us to endure temptation. Resistance to temptation that leads to sin is a skill we build and develop through spiritual strength training. The choice is up to us as to how our God given gifts will be used.

He began a new diet, so he altered his daily route to work so as to avoid passing his favorite bakery. One morning , he accidentally followed his old route. As he approached the bakery window, there was the host of heavenly goodies, waiting. He felt it was no accident, so he prayed, “Lord, it’s up to you. If you want me to have any of those delicious goodies, create a parking place for me directly in front of the bakery.” And sure enough, on the eighth time around the block, there it was!³

Beloved & Baptized: How does knowing and believing this affect the use of your spiritual gifts?

³Homiletics, March 2010

INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

I'd venture a guess that the majority of us have probably not focused on discerning and naming our spiritual gifts. In part it's because we haven't placed much emphasis on them. We've asked you to fill out a Time and Talent survey, but that's a tool to mostly help the church match opportunities with persons available. The Spiritual Gifts inventory you received today is a way to identify your spiritual gifts. For persons who are self aware, it will be a confirmation of your spiritual gifts. Taking the Spiritual Gifts Inventory becomes a spiritual practice to be more in tune with God's generosity toward us and then intentionally employ these gifts in ways that bring God joy! I hope you will be willing to share the results of your survey. The ushers have feedback forms. There are copies at the large screen as well.

Identifying and using our spiritual gifts to help bring about the Reign of God is how we practice faithful stewardship.

The ushers will come to receive our tithes and offerings.

I'll be ready to receive the offerings of the children.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Holy God, make of these gifts, and make of us, their givers, what is possible by your grace and for your purposes. Amen.⁴

THE BENEDICTION

God's extravagant gifts poured out upon us beckon us to continue the flow.

We all encounter temptation; the question is whether we will yield to its fleeting lure.

You are Beloved by God - assured of this in baptism. This assurance empowers us to be faithful. Remember the poor and those who suffer. Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

Amen.



⁴*The Clergy Journal*, M/J 2009