

## GIFTS AND THE GIVER

A woman told her friend that her father had died. The last week of his life was pretty hard because her father had a stroke and lost his ability to speak. She said, "And you know how hard that would be for my daddy. He loved to talk. But his last few days he couldn't speak. I never will forget, my sisters and brother and I were gathered in his hospital room on the last day of his life and we were feeling the pain of his struggle as he tried to communicate with us. Finally he motioned toward my brother as if to say, 'Get me a glass of water.' My brother went over to the sink and filled the glass with water and brought it to my father. But he wouldn't drink it. He motioned as if to say, 'You drink it.' So my brother took a sip. Then my father made a motion, 'Give it to your sister.' He handed the glass to my sister. And then he motioned for my sister to pass the glass to me. And suddenly my brother said, 'Oh, my gosh. He's serving communion.'"

And then they knew that neither death, nor life, nor powers, nor principalities, nor anything else in all creation could separate any of us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And the resurrection became in that hospital room a most wonderfully ordinary event.

(Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, pp. 95-101)

As we bask in the afterglow of Easter, that illustration enables us to reflect further on Christ Jesus' resurrection from the dead and its implications for our lives. As that opening story suggests, knowing that Christ has conquered sin and death, we can have peace in our lives. Rather than being agitated that he couldn't speak, instead of being fearful because death was so near, the father was very calm under the circumstances. Assured of God's presence and love for him, he could quietly communicate his own love to his family. He was very much at peace in his living and in his dying.

While preparing to preach on this passage from John's gospel, I became aware of the many gifts that the risen Christ brings to those who believe in his name. The night of that very first Easter, Jesus' disciples were gathered behind locked doors. After all, the disciples were fearful that the religious authorities could turn their attention on the disciples; if so, they could end up on a Roman cross – just like their Master. In this atmosphere of heightened anxiety, the risen Christ somehow appeared in the midst of the disciples and, what was the first thing he said to them, what was the first gift he gave to them?" The resurrected Lord said, "Peace be with you" and then he repeated the same message for emphasis.

There's more going on here than just the ordinary or customary greeting of the day – much like our "Hello." In John's Gospel, one of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples just before his betrayal and arrest was, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (16:33). Jesus picked up where he had left off. Because he had indeed conquered the world, along with sin and death – and, he had the wounded hands and side to show for it - the disciples could trust him more than ever; and, because Jesus had kept and fulfilled his promises to them, they could certainly breathe easier. Their fears were replaced with the peace of God.

Likewise, when we know Jesus Christ as the risen Lord, we have access to the peace that passes all understanding, a calm within even though troubles are swirling all around us. This peace cannot be purchased in a store; it can only be received as a gift.

Along with his peace, Jesus gave his disciples their commission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." While this may not seem like a gift at first, it truly is because our commissioning defines us as one of those whom Christ has called both to follow him and to be sent into the world on his behalf. We are sent, in his name, to continue his work of reconciling the world to its creator and spreading the love of God in every direction.

I am reminded of the story about a little European village. There was a church that had a statue of Christ with outstretched arms to the world. During the war, the statue was damaged. Both of the hands were broken off. The church made the decision to place a sign under the statue that read, "Christ has no hands but our hands." Now then, let it be said that God is not utterly dependent upon us for doing God's work of righteousness in the world; one way or another, God's will and work are done. Yet, at the same time, Christ has chosen us and Christ sends us to participate in his ongoing work in the world. The gift of our commission gives added purpose and joy to our lives. Next, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In order to do Christ's work and do it well, disciples then and now would need help.

While the Holy Spirit would not come on them with power until the day of Pentecost, Jesus was preparing the disciples, getting them ready, to receive the gift of God's presence and power so that they could fulfill the work to

be done. They would no longer be disciples, or learners or students in training; they would be apostles – those sent in Jesus' name and on his behalf. They would be putting their lives on the line as Jesus' representatives to and for the world. The gift of the Holy Spirit would equip them and make them ready to face and fulfill whatever task came their way.

Another gift that Jesus passed on to his disciples was the gift of faith. Sometimes we have the mistaken notion that faith is something we do, that we consent to in order to be saved. But, here and elsewhere, it is very clear that faith is a gift from God in order to draw us closer to God (and, in the process, closer to each other). The disciples were moved from fear to faith – why? – because the crucified-yet-risen Lord came to them and revealed himself to them.

We don't know where Thomas was on that first resurrection appearance of our Lord, but we know that he wasn't present; and because he was not there, he missed seeing their risen Lord. Even when the others told him, "We have seen the Lord," he did not, could not, believe, until he saw for himself. A week later, Jesus reappeared in their midst. Notice that Jesus didn't berate Thomas for doubting Jesus' resurrection. Instead, Jesus invited Thomas to do what he needed in order to believe; because Thomas had stated earlier that he wouldn't believe unless he could see and touch the nail-scarred marks on Jesus' body and his wounded side, Jesus encouraged Thomas to do just that. In other words, Jesus met Thomas where he was and encouraged him to do what was necessary in order to come to faith. But, Thomas had seen enough for now he had seen his risen Lord. Then, Thomas responded, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus didn't rebuke Thomas; rather, he gave Thomas the tangible proof necessary for Thomas to cross over from doubt to belief. Then note what Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." In saying these words, Jesus was looking across the centuries and, in part, speaking directly to us. We are those, who did not have the luxury of seeing and being with the risen Lord, and yet, by the grace of God, we have seen with "the eyes of the heart" and we too have come to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Once again, we cannot take personal credit for our faith in Jesus Christ. After all, even our ability to believe in God is a gift, a blessing, nothing but grace from God.

John alludes to another gift within this passage. Just after he reveals the true purpose or aim of his gospel, which is that people may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son God, John notes that the result of our believing in Jesus is that we may have life – new, abundant, and eternal life – in his name. To believe in Jesus as the Son of God is to move from mere existence to a life that sparkles with joy, meaning, and fulfillment. This eternal life, which begins on this side of death and then lasts forever, is the gift of God, which keeps on giving!

There is another revealed gift in the story John tells and it is the gift of community or church, the gathered believers together in Christ. The disciples certainly drew strength from the unexpected presence of their risen Lord and, later on, by way of God's gift of the Holy Spirit. But surely the disciples drew strength from one another as well. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles, the early history book of the Church, bears testimony to that fact. We are more dedicated and faithful followers when we have each other to learn from, lean on, and be accountable to as we follow Christ together.

A woman prayed to God to deliver her from a painful and difficult family situation. Her husband is addicted to alcohol and her adult children have paid a price for his problems. They have caused her much sadness in their adult lives. She told her friend that every night, before bedtime, she knelt at her bed and prayed that God would heal her husband of his addiction and that God would bring some sort of order and direction to her children's lives. Night after night she prayed, but still the problems persisted. It seemed that God had turned a deaf ear to her prayers. Yet she had something to be thankful for. She had some wonderful, loyal, and very attentive friends. One of her friends called her every day, just to check in. Her friend provided her someone whom she could talk with, someone who knew the whole story, someone who would listen and not judge. She also had her church; she said, "I live for those times when I can get out of the house and study the Bible and be with friends."

One morning she confessed to her good friend, the one she talked with every day, her disappointment and even her anger that God had not seen fit to deliver her from her family distress. Her friend listened to her complaint. Then her friend said to her, "But, Alice, God did answer your prayer, at least partly. God sent me!" (William H. Willimon) Isn't that the truth? God may not always personally come and fix our problems for us. But, when we experience God's gift of community, sometimes God sends others to help in times of need. In fact, sometimes God sends you and me!

I'm quite sure that there are many other gifts we could name as suggested by this biblical text and other passages of scripture as well. Let us be sure to acknowledge the best gift of all and that is the Giver! God's very own Presence – whether as Creator or the crucified, nail-scarred, risen Lord Jesus or the indwelling, empowering

Holy Spirit – is the gift we want and need the most. Yes, “praise God from whom all blessings flow,” yet, “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” for the Giver of all life is the gift without equal. Let us be joyful and thankful for our many gifts, but, above all else, let us rejoice and give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens – First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA – April 19, 2009)