

March 13, 2011, Collegiate Presbyterian, Scriptures: Galatians 3:28-4:11; 6:9-10

## GIFTS: THE ONES WE RECEIVE; THE ONES WE PASS ON

OPENING: A young Native American boy came to his mother with a turtle he had found. He asked his mother why the shell of the turtle looked like it had been broken and put back together. The mother answered her son's question with the following story:

Long ago at the time of creation, the turtle was not very happy with itself. It was slow and stodgy, because it did not travel fast it had time to look up at the birds and it longed to be like them. It called on the Great Spirit and asked, "Is there any chance that I could be like the birds and fly?" The Great Spirit said, "No, that is not what you were meant to be."

So the turtle made the same appeal to the wise owl and the strong eagle, and they responded essentially the same way, "No, there is no way for that to happen." But then the little turtle went to the crow and asked, "Could you help me to fly?" Now crows are a bit different, they play mind games with us even today. The crow knew it was wrong but he said he would try. So he took the little turtle in his crow feet and flew him up over the hills and the mountains. The turtle was delighted and kept saying to the crow. "I love this; I know what to do to fly just let me go on my own." After some hesitation the crow let go.

You know what happened: the small turtle dropped like a rock and smashed himself on the ground shell first. The Great Spirit saw this and knew there was a great problem. The turtle was still alive, but his home, the shell of the turtle was smashed. The Great Spirit put broken parts together again and nursed the turtle back to health. And that little turtle was gratified with the gift of restoration and from then after was satisfied with who he was. He had a home and he moved with a steady and persistent pace.

### LEARNING TO BE WHO WE ARE.

The process of growth and change always makes a good story, but it never is a neat formula. We are all like the turtle. Before we are at home with ourselves; before we are free to be comfortable in our skin, without wearing masks, without longings to be somehow different, we have to have experiences that break us and ultimately heal us.

The first Galatians passage is about learning how to receive and be satisfied. **"When we were children we were slaves to the elemental spirits. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son...so we may receive adoption as sons and daughters. God had sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, "Abba, Father." So through God you are no longer slaves but heirs of the Creator Spirit. Galatians 4:6-7**

The dynamic of this passage is about receiving. Waiting for trust to develop, overcoming our inferiority feelings. Learning how to quit taking life into our own hands and trying to be someone we can't be, but rather receive and relax into the dynamic of thanksgiving saying "Abba, Mother! Abba, Father." There is an intimacy about receiving.

## RECEIVE IS A FREEDOM WORD, TAKE IS NOT

Receive is what children do in a family. Take is what pirates do on the high seas. All those old stories about our loss of freedom are stories about us taking things into our own hands. Adam and Eve **take** the fruit from the tree. Prometheus **takes** the fire from the gods. Siegfried takes the gold from the Nibelung.

All the stories about access to freedom are stories of receiving. The “elemental spirits” Paul refers to, are how as minors and children we give into the mentors and administrators of the world of taking. We are buffeted around and trained to be “on the take.” But the best stories of scripture are the stories of learning how to receive—such as the prodigal and his brother, so familiar, but so hard for us to handle. The stories of David, or Gomer or Peter are stories about breaking our cover, the shell of protection, and learning out of the brokenness how to receive and be at ease with who we are. In the Eucharist, Christ’s disciples **receive** the elements—the sacramental bread and wine. When that sacrament is re-enacted we are set free and claimed in new ways to be children of God and heirs of the gifts of Christ or to be in the very freedom of Christ.

## AFTER LEARNING HOW TO RECEIVE WE LEARN HOW TO GIVE

Soon after we learn how to talk, how to walk, how to get our way, we constantly say, “I want to do it myself.” Even though we learn that assistance is given graciously, we assume we are independent and can get along without assistance. After we learn how to be independent, we learn the larger concept of being interdependent. We learn about blessings and cruses are not evenly distributed. And we learn finally about giving, letting go and having satisfaction in making a difference. In the beginning we think giving is like dropping a pebble into the middle of a pool and though it makes a few temporary waves, it soon sinks to the bottom inert. No, acts of giving are not pebbles, they are seeds planted in the soil of life, they will come up one day if we are patient and there will be a harvest.

Some of you must wonder why I have a passion for our Anniversary Endowment Fund. It comes out of my life of learning how to receive and how to give. I went into ministry because I had some gifts that fit what I sensed the church needed and still needs. I did not have a great deal of income from ministry, and I was frugal in the beginning--frugal with my money and with other people’s money. Some of my old parishioners might have called me tight or up-tight. But we gave to the church and set an example of stewardship.

I never imagined the resources I have today. Our children did well with scholarships and grants for their education. Early on we saved and made some investments that have turned out well. We have a solid pension plan through the church; with that and social security we have our income to live on. Sara and I came from farms and some of that income from those farms we have coming in today. There was some inheritance and I put quite a bit of my final pay checks of the last years of ministry and the interims of retirement into deferred income. But during all this time we continued to increase our giving to the church.

**Paul says, “So let us not grow weary in well doing for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially to the household of faith. Galatians 6:9-10**

Why do I maintain my passion for this endowment and invite you to share it?

- First, because the need is here now and will continue in our future and we should not have compassion fatigue. **“Do not grow weary...or lose heart”**
- Second, we have the opportunity, we have the relationships here to help each other and stand by each other. In due season we shall reap the promised harvest.
- Third, especially in these relationships, we can do good through and in this household of faith. There are so many calls to help and people asking for our commitment, but I submit that Paul is right. Our place of faith should take president.

In John Updike’s novel *The Coup* there is a character, Don Gibbs who is a U.S. Embassy Official. He tries to deliver a great load of American junkfood to a drought ridden country in Africa call Kush. He is murdered in that attempt and his wife later reflects, “I’ve forgotten a lot about Don...actually I didn’t see much of him. He was always trying to help people. But he only liked to help people that he **didn’t** know.”

Our Centennial Endowment is set up to help what we **do** know and who we care about:

- Our University Ministry as funds from Synod dwindle.
- Our own church building and maintenance needs
- Our future program needs for such things as spiritual formation, youth, music and mission.
- And for a General Unrestricted Fund used for purposes not yet determined as long as under a purpose permitted by our charter.

CLOSING: I’m a big fan of Tony Compolo, a Sociology professor from Eastern Pennsylvania and astute Christian preacher. When David Feltman was here last fall, he told us what Compolo found out when he interviewed people over ninety. He asked this question. What three things would you do in these later years if you had them to live over again. The answers were all along these lines:

**I would reflect more.** Freedom to sense gifts we have received & how we’ve changed.

**I would risk more.** By being free we have a chance to take more chances.

**I would invest in something that would outlive me.** Among our options is our Centennial Endowment which you will continue to hear more and more about.

Gifts: We receive them. We have them. And we can pass them on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

With thanks to Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, Modern Meditations on St. Paul’s Letter of Freedom, Helmers & Howard, 1988