

Impact May 2

John 10

Acts

Rev

“Gifts of Men”

A prayer from John Ballie (1949) *A Diary of Private Prayer*, Scribner's, p. 121:

Almighty and most merciful Father, whose power and whose love eternally work together for the protection of Thy children, give us grace this day to put my trust in Thee.

O Father, I pray—for faith to believe that Thou dost rule the world in truth and righteousness; for faith to believe that I seek first Thy kingdom and righteousness, Thou wilt provide of all my lesser needs;
For faith to take no anxious thought for the morrow, but to believe in the continuance of Thy past mercies; for faith to see Thy purpose of love unfolding itself in the happenings of this time; or faith to be calm and brave in the face of such dangers as may meet us in the doing of our duty;
For faith to believe in the power of thy love to melt our hardened hearts and swallow up our sin;
For faith to put out own trust in love rather than in force, when others harden their hearts against us.
For faith to believe in the ultimate victory of Thy Holy Spirit over disease and death and all the powers of darkness;
For faith to profit by such sufferings as Thou dost call upon us to endure;
For faith to leave in Thy hands the welfare of all our dear ones.
O thought in whom our parents trusted, rid our hearts now of all vain anxieties and paralyzing fears. Give us a cheerful and buoyant spirits, and give us peace in doing Thy will, for Christ's sake. Amen

Sylvia gave the title of the sermon as an assignment more than a month ago. The three texts of John, Acts, and Revelations are assignments by the interdenominational board that picks out a changing variety so that preachers will preach and congregations will hear most of the Bible over time. And I recently learned that a cottage industry of “homily writers” for sermons or ideas for sermons are being written by people to assist folk like me, who are trying to find some connections between such passages.

Fred Edwards, former minister of the University Methodist Church on Colton, is one such writer. He did not, however, write what follows.

It was Sylvia's title that gave me the greatest difficulty, I might add. In the last two decades scores of commentaries on Biblical texts, theologies of liberation, and historical reflections have been written by women in America and elsewhere which have challenged assumptions of truth that were assumed for centuries. Man have been very instructive to me, as things I never learned in divinity school or from the all male faculty who taught me most of what I learned after leaving home. Today half the student bodies in divinity school, theological seminaries, are women. More than half of the graduate students at the "name brand" graduate schools are women. Indeed our little department of 6 at the University, which had 3 males, has now 3 women as well as three men, as full time members of the faculty. Things changed in the last decade. More important for our church, this little congregation on this corner is that the last decade has been mostly ministered to by Sylvia and Jan. Week after week they have brought soul-inspiring, thought-provoking, doubt- dealing and sometime even week-long-haunting sermons from this place. So what can I now say about men?

Breaking a rule about not bringing illustrations from one's family into this discourse, I will venture an observation that I happened to be born into a family with three brothers and a calmly forceful father who influenced an idea that we were to be trained to have a job early in life to pay for anything beyond room and board which were always given. Moreover, I was complimented by having the US Treasury pay for my education by promising three years of military (in my case naval) service. It was then a male profession. I never met a woman in the navy back in what I call the "Ike age" of half a century ago. Was this a gift to me as a male? Perhaps, it certainly has determined my life. I find it hard to consider not doing what I was trained to do half a century ago, and which this year I have done for 40 years. I am not sure everyone would consider it a gift, some would call mine a compulsion. But somehow there is a sense of "vocation" that was seen from ancient times and from the time of the reformation, which Calvin called a "calling" to do work in the work, work blessed by God, done to the glory of God. Puritans, and I among them, if I be not a very good example, were in the world to do good. Hoping, as they, that salvation which could not be demonstrated, would somehow be affirmed in this works righteousness.

(I do admire those who can sit back and appear to be doing nothing. It bothers me that some of them do not even take the trouble to vote, or to find out what the politics of those whom they allow to stay in office by not voting).

My father conveyed this sense of working hard. But he urged us to play hard as well. Is that a gift? He loved every kind of sport possible, and he could play tennis into his 70s, and golf into his 90s. I seem to have given up both of those, but every week I find myself in a pool trying to swim a mile without stopping to rest. If I die in the pool next week or in the Aegean Sea Know that I went in one of the two ways I would like to pass from this life to what follows.

I am aware that at different stages of life, I learned different things about men and their gifts. The first stage of my life came during the first 18 years while I lived at home with my father and brothers; then came a decade of college, the navy, and graduate school (with many mixed messages), that was followed by a decade of teaching in a college in which all the students were males (some were men, most were boys), and now thirty years here which ended last week of teaching mostly women.

I did not have a chance to reflect so much on what I learned from my dad and brothers, until dad died two years ago, and in the grief period, I wrote some remarks for the memorial service of dad back in North Carolina. In that context I was reminded how much of my dad was still alive and functional in my brothers. I share with you some of those reflections as somehow connected to “gifts of men.” There was in my father, and in varying degrees in my brothers and in me to be sure, a competitiveness, honed in skills through games, mental and physical. My brother Reid embodied it best to me, as with other second children in families, he would often measure his height against mine. At the same university, he as a sophomore enrolled in two classes I was taking as a senior-economics, which we both detested, and British literature, which we both loved. I suspected that he wanted to make better grades than I would. He embodied a characteristic from Dad, that is a gift, an orderly checkbook and perhaps orderly tax records. I admire that gift, even if many women I know have a capacity for that gift.

Already I mentioned the Calvinistic comment on vocation as a calling. I did not know what it was as a child, but Dad took his responsibility of being a provider for his wife and four sons. Just by contrast I learned from Barbara Walters this week that 95% of American men who participate in the pregnancy of unmarried women will “walk away” from her and the child, taking no responsibility on their own. I think that both Dad and Mom were a bit surprised when three sons and their wives not only took responsibility for the children created in the same manner as Adam and Eve when they left the Garden called Eden. We also each adopted a child created two people who could not care for those thus created. Adopted kids are as different from each other as the ones that came other ways, but Kim took as much or more energy and love as did Heather, and still does. She calls often from Taiwan. And no doubt she worries as much about us here as does Heather.

My second brother Betts decided upon a career when he was about 8 years old, when he somehow knew he would be a missionary, and to Korea. It all came true 20 years later when he and his wife, and daughter went there and stayed another 20 years. Gifted in language learning of Korean he taught Korean pastors how to deal with their church members and especially counseling. I think he has the most compassion of my brothers, another quality I found in Dad, if mostly in reflection. Certainly compassion is a gift often embodied by women, perhaps more so than men. It is a gift close to love, but it is not love. Jesus taught the world better how to love, a gift he learned from his father. The Buddha is famous for his compassion, not his love. They are different, if close. (One morning this week I was still in the bed thinking about this difficult challenge, and I started thinking what each of the founders of the 7 great world religions would best be remembered for. Since men have dominated each of the religions, for cultural differences, I think, I thought of the Buddha as bringing humankind the gift of compassion, and Confucius brought the gift of honesty and respectfulness to all, those with higher and those with lower rank, Lao Tzu brought the sense of relaxed spirit, nothing exists that we should get too worried about. Like water all is flowing down the hill, as it should be. Relax and take the day off, he might tell our obsessive culture. Moses on the other hand brought the gift of law and with it justice, rules by which we should live and wherever one settles on the planet to keep alive the light of learning and study habits which allow us to discern good from evil, and to take a stand against evil. Muhammed, who has had his followers labeled recently as “terrorists” because so many of them have sensed an injustice done to their religion and culture by Western nations who have undermined true Obedience to God.

The gift that Muhammed made to the world was, I think; mainly to focus belief on One God and through prayer, pilgrimage, giving gifts to others in ways which are understandable to all kinds of people of every language. Jesus shared many similarities with all the other “religious founders” (sages the Japanese organization I studied called them, looking for what is held in common, while I was inclined that year to look for important differences, as if somehow it was the combination of the great religious leaders that could lead to a higher level than we have achieved so far. So much for my reflections before arising, then I got up to pursue more research for this comment.

I have learned in these years that there are many gifts I do not have. I do not have “perfect pitch”, so I resisted the temptation to try to sing for you this morning, playing my guitar, which has better pitch than I and lip-syncing a voice played over the speaker, while I strummed here.

My students and Ed Williams remind me of my ungifted handwriting, which he once called not only bad, but also “grotesque.”

I sometimes aware of the absence of the gift of patience, when I see people ahead of me at traffic lights too slow to turn right on red, when no one is coming from three blocks away, or when I am listening to Bush the Second, trying to explain his foolhardy invasion of Iraq.

A third a far more gift that was conveyed by my parents, and probably more from my Mother in this 24th anniversary month of her death and 99th anniversary of her birth, was the gift of faith. I am conscious of having learned this word from her lips and below the level of words a concept that is crucial to my existence. Faith was affirmed in the prayer. All my brothers are men of faith. The youngest, John, who in someway has overcome the barrier of age and seems now the oldest, in that he not only looks the most like our Dad, but his faith leads him daily to find in the events of his life small messages from God in hidden places, and readings that come into his vision. Each day becomes a challenge for him to find these other hidden clues on a kind of “scavenger hunt” in faith. Faith was the concept in the hearts of those who sent for Peter to have him act on behalf of Tabitha in reading from Acts. It is the source of trust that appears behind the reading in

Rev.7, which was read here this morning. The setting of that passage is in a place and in clothing I have not yet experienced, but if the author of the book of Revelation captures for us any meaning, he does so by the descriptive power of transporting us to the hereafter, in a countless gathering of peoples of different languages before the throne of the Lamb – The Christ. I white robes (not so many out there to notice in our congregation today –perhaps our Mormon friends in their new temple on the hill are wearing white robes, at least I saw where they wear them last August, before the doors would be barred to unbelieving “gentiles” they would call us. The Lamb- the Christ- will feed the hungry and give them living fountains of waters, and God will wipe “every tear from their eyes: (Rev. 7:17)

This can be seen as a background to what we read in the Fourth Gospel, which seems to me to have a different author and a different religious view. For the author of Revelation the religious meaning comes in a hereafter, but in the Fourth Gospel it uses the idea of eternal life as something shared now before we die. Yet the Fourth Evangelist –known as John as well wrote of the connection between Jesus and his followers in the reading from the gospels this day.

Those of us in regular attendance this spring not only heard the resurrection accounts of Jesus and his preparing the meal on the beach with the disciples after that huge catch of fish, but we have been working through John’s gospel over the spring. Today we read the story of Jesus at the Feast of Dedication (Jn. 10:19ff).

What do we find important there? Perhaps Mel Gibson would have focused on the contrast between the words of the Christ and the Jews who rejected him as he walked around the porch of Solomon’s temple as restored by Herod, in that winter day. But Mel did not choose to show us very much of the teaching of Jesus, except the suffering, the loss of blood in one dramatic day instead of the life of teaching which Jesus offered. John the Evangelist who wrote this pericope a century or so after Jesus lived wrote about eternal life, many times. It seems to be a promise of many things, but it is a promise of realized eschatology wherein the future is now present. In other words, the assurance of the future has already dawned. We do not have to wait until we die to know what has happened. Already in their lives the followers of Jesus, his sheep according to John hear the voice of Jesus and are given eternal life. The KJV translates the line they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. The RSV translates they shall never perish and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. The Greek original

reads “kago didomi autois zoin aionion, kai ou mi apolonai eis ton aiona kai oux harpasei tien auto ek tis xeiros mou.

Which do you like “pluck” from Shakespeare’s era, or “snatch” in our century? The Greek seems rough, harpasei.

Howard (“John”, IB, 8,p.632) wrote, “The ground for this assurance is that as those who are his own are the Father’s gift to him. They are not only in his care, but also in the care of the Father; and he is all-powerful. I felt good reading that, for Howard observes that the meaning of this text when understood is that we should feel, as Christians, that we are all GIFTS given by the father to the son. Thus as a man trying to understand a sense of gifts we have, is that all of us here today, all the saints of Community Presbyterian Church, gathered in this place this morning are promised, indeed are living our eternal life, and in doing so we are GIFTS given by the father to the son. But being a GIFT is not to cause us to check the line “male” or “female” on a questionnaire for a driver’s license or an insurance policy, rather all of us male or female, (or even those who are not sure which they want to be). All of us are “gifts of the father to the son.” That is what I learned from this passage in John’s Gospel and the deepest meaning I can imagine of what any gift could be.

It is therefore not something I may pick out of the characteristics of my imagined importance, being a son of my parents, a husband to Helen, a father to Heather and Kim, a teacher to the students during the spring of 2004, rather from today, thanks to this passage and the understanding brought to it by one of the commentators, I shall try to think of myself as a “gift of the Father to the Son!”

How about you? How would it change your life, your understanding of yourself in relation to Christ as the shepherd, you who have been given eternal life, already before you were born, not because of something you did—some great work of yours, but because you were given by God the Father to his Son- the Christ, and so safe is your relationship to the father than you cannot be “seized” (“plucked” or “harpasethei” by any one?

That is how I see being once lost, and now found, once blind, but now in the possession of sight, of vision, of being an sheep in relation to the

shepherd, hearing his voice, and knowing that we are in his care. The line I and my father are one- Ego kai o pater hen esemen, is a crucial verse. John had hinted at this in the first chapter-the Prologue. He wrote 4 other times in the gospel (Ch 1, 3:17ff, 7:29 and 17).

The words spoken that day shocked those who could not understand him. They were not his sheep, and they would have cast stones at Jesus