

“All Kinds of Gifts”

“*He’s a gifted child,*” we may overhear someone say about her child or grandchild. We may wonder, “*What exactly does that mean?*” When we say someone is “gifted,” what are we describing?

For some this means that the person has an artistic talent, like painting, or singing, or dance. For others it describes a person with intellectual ability, perhaps approaching genius, especially in an area like mathematics. For still others this sentiment is totally misplaced, because the child in question possesses no extraordinary skills, talents, abilities, or aptitudes, so the word “gifted” in that context becomes synonymous with, “*I don’t know what else to say positive about him.*” In some contexts, the term “gifted” becomes equated with some form of disability — a learning disorder, or an emotional or developmental deficit — and in a world that is sometimes consumed by ego-polishing, such people are called “gifted” (although the politically correct term is “differently-abled”)

The get to the heart of the matter, “gifted” means simply that the person has been provided some “gift.” In that light, the birthday girl can be said to be “gifted,” as can most of us on Christmas morning. Often, however, many of us do not see, nor will we admit to, the gifts we have been given. For some, this is simply inattention to what God has been doing in their lives. For some it is a fear that, if they acknowledge a gift, they will be expected to put that gift to work. For some, it is ignorance about what is a gift from God (being ignorant is no sin; choosing to stay ignorant may well be).

In today’s Second Lesson, we hear St. Paul proclaim: “***The gifts [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers . . .***” Here’s where ignorance comes into play (and, please, remember “ignorant” does not mean “stupid;” it means “not knowing”). We hear those words and we are conditioned to think that Paul is using titles here: “*The Apostle Paul,*”

“the prophet Isaiah,” Evangelist Billy Graham,” *“Pastor Just”* (that last, I’ll admit, is often thought of not as a title, but as a name). *“Whoa, Pastor... you forgot one. What happened to ‘teacher’?”* I’m glad you asked that: in the Greek, the word pastor (or even better in my estimation, “shepherd”) is joined to the word “teacher” in such a way as to make them virtually a hyphenated word — “pastor-teacher.”

That gives us some insight that what Paul is describing here are not titles but functions, or roles. In other portions of Paul’s writings we get a fuller picture of how each of these functions is supported and enabled by certain gifts. There is, for example, the gift of apostleship. The word “apostle” itself means “one sent.” We tend to use that term to apply solely to personages in the Bible who were specifically commissioned by Christ and sent forth by Him: the Twelve and St. Paul, although Barnabas and a few others are accorded that title. So, by usage, we have turned that function into a title. We needed to recapture the functionality of “apostle,” and we have done so with a different term: “Missionary.”

But here again, ignorance gets into the mix, and we tend to limit the word “missionary” to apply to someone who goes to a foreign country. Actually the term is best applied to those who minister across cultures. In that spirit, I had a local missionary in a former congregation; Steve Gerhard (who is now with the Lord) was a missionary to the Redeemer Crisis Center. He did not go overseas (and I have no idea how he would have felt about being asked to), but he was immersed in a different culture at the corner of Walton and West 28th Streets on Cleveland’s west side, a world away from the relative calmness of the Nordonia Hills. No, I am not henceforth going to refer to him as “The Apostle Steve.”

Now let me explore this a bit more. I would be willing to wager that forty years ago, if you had suggested to Steve Gerhard that he would be doing missionary work, he would have responded with either an expression of surprised disbelief, or laughed . . . or both. But something happened in him that led him to respond to the needs at the Crisis Center, and in responding, to find a place where God planted him for ministry. I’d

further wager that he could not explain why this happened, and maybe not even when it happened. But his ongoing and constantly-growing involvement in that ministry was sure sign that something did happen inside Steve Gerhard.

I would suggest that what happened was that Steve was gifted. It may be that Steve was just as gifted as a toddler, and it took him a few (about sixty) years to discover that gifting and put it to use; or it may be (as I suspect is the case) that there was an outpouring of spiritual giftedness to meet this specific need for ministry. It is not my intent to turn this sermon into “*Steve Gerhard: This was Your Life.*” I do want to affirm that such gifting is at the core of what God is doing in the Church, including this church, daily.

In today’s Gospel, we hear the continuation of the narrative begun last week — the miracle of Feeding Five Thousand. As John tells the story, the miracle was just the beginning of a whole series of events that the miracle event set into motion. People are hungry and are fed; that is miracle enough. Then in last Sunday’s reading we heard, that “... ***Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king . . .***” and hit the highway. This miracle had more implications than just the feeding — now there is a political aspect at work (you may begin to see how Jesus’ opponents might use this against Him).

Today we learn that this crowd comes following after him; these folks know a good deal when they experience one. Bread and fish in abundance? Who would not pursue that? [Well, I, for one — I avoid fish. It might just get in the way of my breathing, and I have sort of grown accustomed to breathing.] Jesus picks up on the motivation for this crowd: “...***you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.***”

Would you vote to re-elect a politician who had reduced your grocery bill by half? I think I would. Full bellies, comfortable surroundings, a little money in the bank, security for all of the above — these are the things of politics. Jesus wants none of it.

The loaves and fish were gifts provided to meet a specific need. Jesus is now focused on a different kind of gift. He encourages the crowd to shift their focus from the mundane to the spiritual: ***“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”***

As is often the case, they miss the point entirely. Jesus told them not to work for, but to seek after a gift. They immediately ask: ***“So what do we have to do?”*** They who have just enjoyed a free lunch are convinced there is no free lunch. (Careful lest you judge; you and I are to be found in this crowd.) Jesus’ reply? ***“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”*** You are not going to do anything; God will do whatever work needs to be done. And what is that work will God do? That you will believe.

Faith, belief, is a gift. Unfortunately, even though we have heard this time and again, we continue to keep our focus on performance. I need to get my act together . . . I need to behave . . . I need to give more (right there is where the church so often feeds into this performance anxiety; we keep telling you that you do indeed need to give more, because we need the money to pay the bills) . . . I need to improve my devotional life, my prayer life, my Bible reading, my . . . *ad nauseam*.

No! ***“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”*** Trust me, Jesus is saying — not because it will gain you riches, or fame, or status, or a full refrigerator, or a full gas tank, or a full stomach, or any of the hundreds and thousands of things you have been told are most important — trust me, and you will have the one gift that really lasts.

Skeptical? I remind you, you and I are in this crowd. They ask, ***“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?”*** Sign? What sign?!? What was that feeding you just came from? Oh, how quickly we allow the goodness of God to fade from our memory!

Then, echoing what we hear in today's First Lesson, they point back to the wilderness wandering in Exodus and how Moses was there to provide them with manna. As if their ancestors had been people of great faith and trust in those events — these people did not venerate their forebears; they glorified them.

Once again Jesus brings them back on point: First, get off the focus on the ancestors, the Father did it all. Second, and more to the point, ***“it is my Father who [now] gives you the true bread from heaven.”*** What bread is that? ***“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”***

In High School I painted a portrait of Jesus bald, because in this instance as in so many others, if I had to deal with the crowds and, more often, the Twelve, I'd have ripped out my hair. Case in point: ***“Sir, give us this bread always.”*** Give us the unending loaf, the spigot that will not turn off, the eternal buffet. They are right back to full bellies, full refrigerators, full pantries — *“That's good, Jesus. Just keep it coming.”*

Listen very closely to Jesus now: ***“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*** Next week we will begin from there. But I can't just say, *“Tune in next week, same time, same station.”* I need to point out now — the crowd is asking for something yet to come. Jesus tells them it is already fully present. And the gift's effect is equally present in full force — the better translation of this last verse in today's Gospel would read: *“The one coming to me does not hunger, the one believing in me does not thirst.”* The gift that is Jesus is what satisfies the hungry heart.

So, there are all kinds of gifts at work in today's readings. Let me take them in sequence.

The people of Israel were provided manna (and later quail) in the wilderness. It literally dropped from the sky. It was a gift to match their need of the moment. Indeed, the instructions were to take only what was needed for the moment and not to hoard it for the future. Some gifts from

God are for here and now — food for an empty refrigerator, clothing for empty closets, school supplies so there will not be empty minds.

Paul encourages the Church at Ephesus to recognize in their midst the gifts of God at work; in so doing encourages us to see in ourselves and in one another the giftedness from God that is here to do the work of ministry. How many missionaries, like Steve Gerhart, do we have right here in this room? Who here could speak out God's word? Who here could share the love of Christ with someone else? Who here can provide nurture and instruction, guidance and mentoring for another?

We want to look outside of our circle to find such people — I have good news for you: They are already sitting in these pews. Look to your left; look to your right — apostle, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers everywhere you look. Then go home and look in the mirror and earnestly pray that God would reveal to you the gift you are and are to be.

Then reflect on Jesus — the True Bread, the ultimate gift. Feed on Him. Let Him fill you . . . do not be satisfied with a taste, a nibble, take in all that Jesus offers . . . drink deeply at that well. No longer chase after what you have been led to think will satisfy — only Jesus can promise: *“The one coming to me does not hunger, the one believing in me does not thirst.”*

What gifts!

Amen.