

GIFTS FOR THE JOURNEY

Exodus 16:2-15, OT p. 62
Romans 12:1-13, NT p. 162
Matthew 20:1-16, NT p. 21

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25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Marilyn Allen

It's all gift. It's all grace. The people of Israel came out of Egypt by God's grace. They had to put one foot in front of the other, but they crossed the sea by God's grace. They received meat one night and then bread from heaven, morning after morning, by the grace of God. In spite of their complaining, the Lord was with them on their long journey.

It's all gift. It's all grace. The Apostle Paul wrote to that small group of followers of the way of Jesus. We're all part of the same body, he told the Christians in Rome, and we all have gifts to share and work to do. But we can't boast about it, as if we are somehow better than others if we work harder or have a more obvious ability. Everything we can do is by the grace of God.

It's all gift. It's all grace. Jesus told his disciples the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The owner kept hiring, but only the first workers had a contract. The others would get "what is right." At the end of the day, they all were given the same. What the last worker received could not be called a wage. It was a gift. Gifts are symbols of relationships, and all the workers could have been glad that their neighbors' families would eat that night because of the vineyard owner's generosity.

Yet in spite of the parable of the workers, what we do is not un-important. Certainly Matthew speaks often of the words of Jesus about good works. In the previous chapter, Jesus told a rich young man to give everything away in order to follow him. He promised the disciples rewards of family, houses and lands because they had given up everything. And later Jesus tells the story of the last judgment, where people are rewarded on the basis of what they have done for the "least of these."

So what we do is important – it's just not the whole story, and it's certainly not the beginning of the story. It is by God's grace that we are who we are. The Spirit of God gives us gifts to do the work of Christ in our own time, in our own place. We can't take much credit for what God has called us to be and do. We receive God's grace, give thanks, and share it with others, as gift.

What do you do when you receive a birthday present? Maybe you shake it a bit, or try to guess by the size and shape and weight what it is. Then you open it. You say "thank you" to the giver, and then you do whatever that gift suggests. If it's a book, you read it. If it's a puzzle, you spread it out on a table and put it together. You put a bouquet of flowers in a vase, in a place of honor. And so forth. The gift is put to use or set out to be admired right away. The giver is remembered with gratitude.

Unless you're the Israelites out in the wilderness. "We're hungry," they complain, and I'm sure it was the truth. So God sends them manna. The word means something like, "What is it?" They didn't know what to do with it, or how much to gather. Certainly there were no recipes, and so they complained again. Yet the manna was a gift, and all gifts are to be received with thanks.

Unless you're one of the earliest followers of Jesus, and you don't know what to do with all those pagans who show up at your church, excited about the good news of Christ and ready to put their spiritual gifts to work, without paying much attention to those Jewish rules for right living or even to who is in charge. Yet even the gifts of a person you're not sure of may be received with thanks.

The gift is received with thanksgiving, unless you're an all-day worker who compares his wage with the pay of a person who worked one hour, and it's the same. You don't want to believe that what the short-time worker received is more like a gift, and any gift, even to someone else, can be celebrated.

Each one of us has received gifts from God. The most important, of course, is the gift of grace that welcomes us into the family of God. We also receive gifts from those who share this journey of faith with us. Sometimes those gifts come in surprising forms, from surprising people. Do we remember to be thankful for what we have received?

And so we come to your part of the sermon. I'd like to hear what gift or gifts you have received from God through our church or from the people of Plymouth Church, either recently or in years past. Or I can read what you've written. If you like, you can put those slips of paper in the offering, and I'll read them privately. (Pause for comments about gifts from Plymouth.)

These gifts have been given to us by the grace of God. Without them, our own spiritual journeys would have been more difficult, and so we give thanks for all that we have received. As a congregation, we have had a long journey, 115 years, with many ups and downs. Plymouth is still on the way of Christ. Today we are grateful to God for the many people and many gifts who have come before us. Now it's our turn, to receive God's grace and to listen for the call of the Spirit, who gives us the gifts we need for our own time. Let us celebrate our gifts, and rededicate ourselves to the work of Christ.

Let us pray. Eternal God, we can never deserve what you have to give. Let us receive your grace with open hearts, that our lives may reflect your generous love each day. Amen.