First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

Unwanted Gifts

7/23/23

Romans 12:3-19 (Amplified Translation)

**3**For by the grace [of God] given to me I say to every one of you not to think more highly of himself [and of his importance and ability] than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has apportioned to each a degree of faith [and a purpose designed for service]. **4**For just as in one [physical] body we have many parts, and these parts do not all have the same function *or* special use, **5**so we, who are many, are [nevertheless just] one body in Christ, and individually [we are] parts one of another [mutually dependent on each other]. **6**Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to use them accordingly*: if [someone has the gift of] prophecy, [let him speak a new message from God to His people] in proportion to the faith *possessed*; **7**if service, in the act of serving; or he who teaches, in the act of teaching; **8**or he who encourages, in the act of encouragement; he who gives, with generosity; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy [in caring for others], with cheerfulness. **9**Love is to be sincere *and* active [the real thing—without guile and hypocrisy]. Hate what is evil [detest all ungodliness, do not tolerate wickedness]; hold on tightly to what is good. **10**Be devoted to one another with [authentic] brotherly affection [as members of one family], give preference to one another in honor; **11**never lagging behind in diligence; aglow in the Spirit, *enthusiastically* serving the Lord; **12***constantly* rejoicing in hope [because of our confidence in Christ], steadfast *and* patient in distress, devoted to prayer [continually seeking wisdom, guidance, and strength], **13**contributing to the needs of God’s people, pursuing [the practice of] hospitality. **14**Bless those who persecute you [who cause you harm or hardship]; bless and do not curse [them]. **15**Rejoice with those who rejoice [sharing others’ joy], and weep with those who weep [sharing others’ grief]. **16**Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty [conceited, self-important, exclusive], but associate with humble people [those with a realistic self-view]. Do not overestimate yourself. **17**Never repay anyone evil for evil. Take thought for what is right *and* gracious *and* proper in the sight of everyone. **18**If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave the way open for God’s wrath [and His judicial righteousness]; for it is written [in Scripture], “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

One of the things I particularly like about our Tuesday night Bible study, is hearing scripture read from different translations. Now, I have my favorite translations, as each of the participants do, and two of my favorites are the NRSV, which is the “official” version of the Presbyterian Church, as well as The Message, which was translated by a Presbyterian minister. Comparing and contrasting the different translations is what makes Bible study fun, at least for this Bible geek, because it always sparks some very interesting conversations and provides me with a wide variety of perspectives which make sermon writing a bit easier.

These different perspectives are particularly important, for me, especially when I’m looking at the writings of the Apostle Paul. I used to struggle quite a bit with Paul, as a surface reading of his various writings seem to make the case that women are, at best, to be considered second class citizens within the institutional church. And his views on LGBT folk seem to be much, much worse. Paul is credited with authoring between 24 and 28% of what constitutes the New Testament, and he is certainly one, if not the most, influential writers of our sacred text. And because of Paul’s influence, and the way that many in the institutional church have misinterpreted much of Paul’s message, over the centuries, it becomes absolutely critical to read his writings through a contextual lens.

In many translations, today’s passage is subtitled, “The Marks of a True Christian.” Paul is teaching Roman converts about what distinguishes the teachings of Christ from other religions. And I think he’s come up with a pretty good list of what constitutes a Christian; humility, mutual dependency, mercy, love and service, to name a few. Paul goes on to remind his readers of the fact that God has given each of us different gifts that are intended to be used in building up the Kingdom. Today, I’m going to focus on the gifts portion of the text today, but not necessarily in the way you might think.

Starting at verse six, we read, ***6****Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to use them accordingly: if [someone has the gift of] prophecy, [let him speak a new message from God to His people] in proportion to the faith possessed;* ***7****if service, in the act of serving; or he who teaches, in the act of teaching;* ***8****or he who encourages, in the act of encouragement; he who gives, with generosity; he who leads, [d]with diligence; he who shows mercy [in caring for others], with cheerfulness.* What Paul is saying here, is that we are meant to use the gifts that have been given us, by the grace of God, and I absolutely agree with that. But what happens when the church; this body of Christ which we are all a part of, chooses instead to reject those gifts, solely based on who the person offering them happens to be?

Last Sunday evening, I was at a dinner party in Logan, with a group of men most of whom I had never met. In the room, there were college professors, professional musicians, artists, scientists, chefs, international businessmen and athletes. The group ranged in age from 21 to 64 and they were all intelligent, warm, funny, talented, and down to earth. They welcomed me into their circle, without hesitation, and made me feel right at home. It was a great evening and I’m glad I was invited to join them.

There were two things that all the men in this diverse group had in common. One, they were all gay, and two, we had either all left, or been excommunicated from the Mormon Church. Now, before I go on, let me say that this isn’t a Mormon bashing sermon. You could have very easily substitute Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, or just about any other denomination out there, for Mormon, and more than likely you’d end up with the same results. That said, given that we live in a part of the country where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the predominate expression of Christianity, and given their stance on LGBT issues, what I encountered wasn’t surprising.

As the dinner progressed, I couldn’t help thinking about how the church had chosen to throw away the gifts of this incredibly talented group of men, simply because of who they were. How could the kingdom have been built up; how could God have been glorified, if only these talents and talents hadn’t been refused? It angered me, and saddened me at the same time, because I know from personal experience that this wasn’t an anomaly, or an isolated situation.

I’ll add, at this point, that it isn’t simply the gifts of the church’s LGBT children that are discarded in such a caviler manner. The gifts of women and, in many cases, the gifts of racial minorities and many others who stand on the margins of our society, are rejected by some “true” Christians, as well. If you’ve ever offered gifts and talents to the church, only to be told, “nope, we don’t want those,” then you understand where I’m coming from. And I believe the church will have to answer to God for the pain and suffering that has been, and still is, caused by these acts of rejection.

So, let’s turn this whole gift thing around and look at it from a different vantage point, because having our own gifts rejected is only half of the problem.

While I was living in Seattle, the homeless population exploded. There were any number of reasons for that increase, which I won’t go into right now, but the end result was that it became very common to be asked for money multiple times while I was out and about. This is not an uncommon occurrence for those who live in large, or even medium sized cities, as many of you know. I got used to walking at a brisk pace, eyes forward and refusing to engage with these not so clean, not so nice people.

I can’t put my finger on it, but at some point, I began to realize that these folks, who many consider by to be the dregs of society, were offering me a gift. I was being given the opportunity to accept the gift of helping and showing compassion to another child of God. I was being offered the gift of living into the faith I claim as my own. I was being offered the gift of taking steps to break down the barriers of “us versus them,” and I was being offered the gift of showing the world what the marks of a true Christian are. All I had to do was accept those gifts.

That realization ultimately led me to work with the Session of my congregation to convert our church’s large, unused basement into a family shelter, which was the first of its kind in a county of roughly 2 million people. And, I’m happy to say, that the shelter we established all those years ago, is still going strong.

So, folks, here’s the question of the day; what gifts do we reject simply because they are being offered by someone we don’t like or approve of? What opportunities to live out our faith; to exhibit the marks of being a true Christian, do we pass up because of what I refer to as the “ick factor,” which I define as behaviors or activities that we find personally distasteful.

What would the world be like if we were to follow Paul’s admonition to serve, to love, to give, with enthusiasm? How different would our society, and the church, be if we truly tore down the walls of “us versus them,” and simply accepted all people as fellow children of God, without exception or any caveats? What would it look like if all truly meant all, y’all?

The marks of a true Christian aren’t something that God forces on us; there is that pesky free-will thing, after all. We are, though, given the opportunity to close the gap between *saying* we’re followers of Christ and actually *being* followers of Christ.

I’m a huge Mission Impossible fan, both of the 60’s TV series and the Tom Cruise movies, so I’ll leave you with this. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is simple: Close the gap, match your words to your actions, accept the gifts of those who you consider to be the other, without any conditions or caveats, and go out showing the world who Christians truly are.

AMEN