

UNEXPECTED GIFTS

(01/03/10)

Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:1-10
Mark 16:14-18

“But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’” (Acts 3:6)

This morning, as we enter into a new year, looking back on the year that has past and straining our imagination to peer into the darkness and mystery of the year to come, we encounter the matter of expectations. We think about the past year, what we expected and what life actually brought us. We think about the year to come, what we anticipate. We know that reality will invariably differ from our expectations, sometimes in dramatic or unexpected ways.

The scripture lesson for this morning illustrates both the theme of expectations and the theme of healing. It speaks to our need for a faith-filled stance toward the uncertainty of the year that lies ahead. It reminds us that life will bring not only pain and tragedy, which it will; it will also bring unexpected gifts. These gifts, which arise from the light of God’s presence, are God’s way of compensating for the darkness that seems not only powerful but ubiquitous in our world.

In our scripture lesson from the Book of Acts, we encounter a man who is lame. Perhaps the ailment is physical, a certain weakness of the muscles or partial paralysis. Perhaps his lameness refers to something else, to a weakness in the way this man is approaching life. The exact nature of his disability isn’t important. For whatever reason, he is meeting life as half a man.

The man sets up his begging station by the gate of the temple. At least we know there is nothing wrong with his mind, for religious people are a easy mark for beggars. It would be difficult for most of us to walk past a beggar just outside the door of our church as we enter on a Sunday morning. Certain words of scripture might come to

mind, e.g., “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.”

As Peter and John approach the temple, the man brings his expectations to bear upon their relationship. He hopes they will give him money. He receives something quite different, quite unexpected, and infinitely more valuable.

And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

The man who was lame from birth asks for something to make his disability more bearable. What he receives is the power to overcome his disability, to be healed or made whole. He misjudged what Peter and John might have to give, for they appear to be poor, simple fishermen. Peter and John give only what they have. However, because of their faith, what they have is a lot.

Remember, all the people in the Bible are part of us. If we identify with Peter and John, we may begin to discover some of the resources we have in our own lives, in our outreach to others, including the healing power of our intercessory prayer. Peter and John were disciples, followers of Jesus who, after their encounter with the Holy Spirit, became apostles, people who were charged by Jesus to carry the Gospel, the good news of God’s healing love to the world. We, too, are called to disciples and also apostles, the incarnation of Jesus’ spirit in the world.

As Christian disciples/apostles, we often set our expectations too low in what we expect from our religion and what we give to the world. We offer gold and silver when we have the power to offer ourselves. Scripture tells us Jesus gave his disciples “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.” If we embark upon our life as individuals and as a church with an attitude of

faith, even a measure of faith as small as a grain of mustard seed, we will see miracles in our lives and in the lives of others.

If we identify with the man who was lame, we may discover that we are like the beggar, limited, and in need of healing, and we may be able to discover the tremendous healing power of our relationship with God.. The healing for which we long may be a physical healing, our need to be healed of some illness or condition that keeps us from living a healthy and vital life. The healing for which we long may be an emotional healing, our need to be healed of some affliction that torments us or causes strife in our relationships. The healing for which we long may be a spiritual healing, our need to reconnect with the spiritual center of our life. When we identify with the beggar in the story, we come face to face with our own need to be healed.

We all have our weaknesses and infirmities, the self-defeating attitudes and limiting self-concepts that undermine the fullness of our response to life. God has the desire and the power to heal us, if we will open ourselves in faith. Here is where our expectations can hold us back. We know what we *want* from life and from God, when what we *need* may be different. When God doesn't meet our expectations, we may turn away angry and bitter, missing the unexpected gift that we have actually been given.

I know it sounds strange, but many of us seem to have no expectations of God. Is it because we really don't believe in God's healing power? We live our lives as if God didn't exist. We don't bring God into the depths of our relationships, our struggles and our conflicts. We don't tap the resources of our faith in time of trial or make our faith the center of our emotional and spiritual growth.

Our expectations of God may be too limited. They may also be excessive or unrealistic. Our expectations are unrealistic if we expect God to bail us out of every difficulty, to construct a life for us where pain, illness, tragedy, and death play no role. This is not the kind of life God wills for us or for anyone. God gives us the resources we need to carry the burdens that life places upon our shoulders. God also gives us

unlimited opportunities for love, countless experiences of healing, innumerable moments of joy if we will only open our eyes and our hearts to experience them.

Think of the expectations you brought to the year we have just lived. Last year was not what I expected or probably what you expected. Is it ever? I suspect it brought more pain and hardship than you anticipated. For many of us here this morning it brought illness. It may even have brought the death of someone we loved.

Yet here we are -- gathered at the threshold of a new year. We meet here this morning to renew our faith, to affirm our trust in that God who is the source, the sustaining power, and the end of all life. We come to draw strength and comfort from each other that we might not only be the recipients of unexpected healing in the year to come but that we might offer that healing message, that healing presence to others.

As we step forward into the year that stretches before us, let us do so with hope. The hope which we bring to the year that lies ahead is based on more than wishful thinking. It is based on the realization that some wonderful things happened to us this past year. When we were struggling, someone unexpectedly reached out to us. When we were feeling alone, someone visited us. When we were discouraged, someone or perhaps even the scriptures spoke a word of hope. When we were going through a difficult time, we were sustained by the knowledge that people cared.

As we step forward into a new year and a new decade, let us try to remember all the wonderful things that happened to us in the year which is coming to a close. We should remember those moments when our lives were touched by love. We should recall those unexpected experiences of healing that took place. We should discern how God's guiding, sustaining presence accompanied us on our journey.

The Gospel tells us we should face life with the eager expectation of the beggar by the temple gate. We should also remember that what we expect, what we think we want from life, will probably be quite different from the life we actually experience, the life we will actually live. Life will not be what we expect: in many ways it will be better.

Like Peter and John, we are called to be both disciples and apostles. We are called to give what we have, to share what we have with those who are in need. We are called to respond to the beggar who sits by the gate of the temple, no matter where we encounter him or are encountered by him in the year to come.

Like Peter and John, we can only give what we have. However, as scripture reminds us, what we have to give is a lot. Because we are more than we think we are, we have more to give than we realize. We may not only receive unexpected gifts in the year to come; we may *be* an unexpected gift. We may be or have exactly what someone needs, what our church needs, and what our world needs in the year to come.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
January 3, 2010*