

## **“Re-Gifting”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, March 3, 2013**

**Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 63  
New Testament Lesson - 1 Corinthians 10:1-13**

Beckah Fink from Texas wrote to Dear Abby about a gift gone bad: “A young man from a wealthy family was about to graduate from high school,” wrote Fink. “It was the custom in that affluent neighborhood for the parents to give the graduate an automobile.

‘Bill’ and his father had spent months looking at cars, and the week before graduation they found the perfect car. Bill was certain that the car would be his on graduation night.

Imagine his disappointment when, on the eve of his graduation, Bill’s father handed him a gift-wrapped Bible! Bill was so angry, he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house. He and his father never saw each other again.

It was the news of his father’s death that brought Bill home again. As he sat one night, going through his father’s possessions..., he came across the Bible his father had given him. He brushed away the dust and opened it to find a cashier’s check, dated the day of his graduation – in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s hard to believe that someone would be so short-sighted and reactionary; holding the gift of his dreams in the palm of his hand, only to toss it away thoughtlessly – and even defiantly.

Hard to believe, until we think about the gifts with which God reaches out to us everyday; gifts that we ignore, refuse to accept, pervert, abuse and otherwise turn them from blessings into curses, from growth opportunities into burdens.

In our New Testament lesson, we read that “God was not pleased with (the ancient Israelites), and they were struck down in the wilderness.” And that “these things occurred as examples for us...” The fate of an ancient people; as an example for us? Well, we better take a look at this, shouldn’t we?

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<sup>1</sup> “Dear Abby,” Rocky Mountain News, 2 September 1992, 55.

The wilderness, as we've come to know it, is a place of temptation and misguided, evil thinking. The Apostle Paul tells us that the Israelites ill-fated wilderness experience took place as an example "so that we might not desire evil as they did."

But what did they do that was so evil; what does Paul say about them? He says they "were all under the cloud (of God's protection) and passed through the sea (and were saved from the Egyptians), and all were baptized into Moses," which means they were given the Law, the 10 Commandments. They all "ate the same spiritual food (manna from heaven)," says Paul, "and all drank the same spiritual drink (water brought forth from the rock by the staff that God had given to Moses to lead God's people.)"

And God was not pleased with them. But why? Because they had ruined God's gifts to them. They turned from God's protection and made idols of gold, forgot about God saving them from the Egyptians and wallowed in their lack of faith in the wilderness, and they perverted the Law of Moses – they took God's teachings and became hypocritical, lording them over people in order to gain political power and wealth as self-righteous, religious and secular leaders.

They hoarded manna from heaven – the daily bread, the food God had given them – and it rotted. They were given water from the rock to quench their thirst, and looked on it as some sort of magic trick rather than as the living water of the Lord.

In other words, they took what God had given them as a blessing and turned it into a curse. And Paul says that this occurred as an example for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.

So, how are we doing? Do you think we've learned our lesson? Do we rely on God's protection in life, or do we seek to go it along? Do we remember and honor the salvation that God achieved for us in Christ, or do we act like we're immortal and just go through the motions, trying to have our cake and eat it, too, doing just enough to stave off disease and illness without bothering to pray about or seek out the way God would have us live, as individuals and communities, as nations, and the human race?

Do we try to learn about and apply God's law – the divine, spiritual guidance that wells up in our own hearts – spiritual laws like turn the other cheek, lay down one's life for another, walk that extra mile, return no one evil for evil – or do we go around bullying and putting down other people.

Do we take just enough food or other provisions to get us by, or do we hoard our possessions and money while others go without.

Do we rely on God to cleanse us of our sins and to quench our spiritual thirst, or do we refuse God's grace and mercy; is our spiritual life dry and dusty for lack of attention? In other words, do we take what God has given us as a blessing and turn it into a curse. And if so, why? Why do we do that?

Theologian Robert Ochs says there are three ways to take a gift: It may be taken for granted, it may be taken with guilt, or it may be taken with gratitude. How are you taking God's gifts to you? If we take them for granted, or with guilt, or if we refuse to take them at all, why is that?

Paul says, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters." Could it be that we are just unaware of all that God gives to us? Paul thinks so. Paul thinks that we just don't know what God is giving us, or how to receive it. Paul realizes that some of us may be too distracted by the world around us – too consumed by our immense and overwhelming responsibilities and in the midst of that we fail to realize God is even reaching out to us.

So Paul writes a letter – to us. "Do not become idolaters," says Paul. Do not worship things, or other people, or money, or substances such as drugs, alcohol or even food or pop or caffeine – as if these are the things we need to get through the day. "We must not indulge in sexual immorality," says Paul. Do not take your sexuality, your God-given desire for intimacy and procreation, and turn it into a sexual playground based on nothing but pleasure or peer pressure or addiction or dominance or abuse. "Do not put Christ to the test," says Paul, refusing the grace and mercy God so freely gives to us. Do not try to stand or fall on our own – because you will fall; apart from Christ, we all fall short. "Do not complain,"<sup>2</sup> says Paul, as if God's guidance and will for our lives is more than we can handle or somehow not leading to something greater still. God can guide us as faithfully as God does; God can direct us as clearly as if speaking right from the center of our own heart, and still we go astray.

Consider the poor soul who, after starting a new diet, went to great lengths to avoid passing the bakery on the way to work. And then one morning, accidentally driving by the bakery – and seeing a host of goodies in the window – the prayer goes up: "Lord, it's up to you. If you want me to have any of those delicious goodies, create a parking place for me directly in front of the bakery." And sure enough, on the eighth time around the block, there it was!

We are a defiant, strong-willed, self-righteous bunch, aren't we? And Paul knows this about us. He warns us, saying, "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

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<sup>2</sup> Cross reference Num 21:5 and Deut 1:26-27.

And he encourages us says, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Well, the way out of course is Jesus Christ. This is the Good News! We can follow that way by practicing the teachings of Jesus; by purifying ourselves through Communion at the Lord's Table, coming forth spiritually with a heart of repentance about what we've done wrong; by living into our baptismal vows and turning away from temptation and nurturing each other in the faith; by practicing what we preach, walking the walk, setting a good example, and keeping the door open to fuller participation in the body of Christ. We can follow the way of Jesus.

But that means nurturing, not just those of us here, but all of our family, friends and loved ones, any acquaintances, and neighbors, and even the strangers in our lives – nurturing them and loving them in Christ, in faith, into the church.

Love them into this church or into finding one that God might be calling them to, calling to them by what they see God doing in you. And to do that, we have to be living life faithfully, and that's hard work; that's a tall order; that's our Christian calling. And God does indeed provide a way for us to do it.

There are countless ways for you and me to equip ourselves for more healthy and Christ-like living, to protect ourselves from giving in to temptations or becoming lost in the wilderness.

One good way is to identify your "No-Go Zones." These are zones or places in your life that you must not go. Because if you do, you just know you're a dead duck, your goose is cooked, temptation, 1; Dave, Zero.

Your No-Go Zone may be geographical – a street or store you need to stay away from; it may be a person, someone who you know is going to lead you into trouble; it might be a website; it could be movies or trashy novels. You get the idea. You must know what your no-go zones are, and where they're located.

A No-Go Zone is any person, place or thing; and thoughts or compulsions that has you take the gifts of God – those things that God provides for our wellbeing – food, sexuality, work and leisure, family and friends and even strangers, community resources and religious and spiritual places and practices – any of the good things in life that God gives to us that we take and give right back; re-gifting them.

All that God gives to us is for our good use, to God's glory. And there is only one right way to give it back – and that's to pass it on.

We were not created to be re-gifters, but rather gift givers – givers and receivers of divine and holy gifts. As God reaches out to us, how will you respond? As a re-gifter, or as a thankful and faithful gift-giver? Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Holy and merciful God, your Word is a lamp to our feet, illumining the way of salvation and life.

We are grateful for its powerful beam that guides us to safety when we lose our way.

We trust it to correct our direction when we drift dangerously close to the shoals of life.

We rely on it as a faithful compass as we traverse the complex world in which we live.

We receive it as a gift and a revelation and ask that you continue to use it to speak, invite, admonish and woo us with the message of your profound, unfathomable love.

Help us, too, to lift up your word to others, even as we lift up in song the prayer that you taught us, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.