



Date: April 23, 2017

Title: "Gifted Past, Bold Future, Part 1: the Gift"

Scripture: Psalm 100, 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Description: You have been given the gift. What shall you do with it?

The words came to the preacher in an envelope marked "personal." The words, not many words, were written on a pad that sits beside the phone in a motel room, in this case a Red Roof Inn. These words were written on a pad, folded three times, and put in a man's billfold, where they appeared to have been carried for perhaps years. His daughter attached a note when she sent them to the preacher. "We were cleaning out Dad's effects when we came across this. I tossed it, then I retrieved it", she said. "I remembered that you have been his friend longer than I have been his daughter. So I thought you might know what it is he says. I don't have a clue."

I have a clue. I think everybody in this room will have a clue.

"What shall I do with the gift?

I with my hands receiving,

I with my heart believing,

I with accomplishments weaving,

What shall I do with the gift?"

You know exactly what he's talking about. What shall I do with the gift?

A short answer is deny that it's a gift. Every once in a while, after a Children's Sermon in which I especially make a fool of myself, some of you will say, "Great Children's Sermon today. You really have the gift!" I am tempted to say, "Gift, my hiney! I was up at 3:00 am working on that Children's Sermon!" It's hard work and serious effort, not a gift. I pretend those Children's Sermons are solely the result of my labor. And yet I never know in advance which ones are going to work and which are going to fall flat. Because you and I both know—they are gifts.

It must be a gift, because sometimes—many times—we work hard with all our efforts and get no results at all. You've tried to become a better golfer, or teach a child to enjoy math. Of course you give it your all, but when it succeeds, you know that the outcome was a gift. What do you do with the gift?

One way to answer the question, "What shall I do with the gift?" Just complain about it. Moses tried that. When God called Moses to confront Pharaoh, Moses

complained from every angle he could think of. "I'm not a good speaker! I can't do this all by myself! They won't believe me! I don't even know your name, Burning Bush!" You want to resist by complaining? Get in a long line, which forms behind Moses. Do you grow just a tiny bit impatient when someone complains endlessly about how their life is just unbearable because the sun roof on their new Mercedes won't open? What we call a "first-world problem." A closet full, no a life full of gifts, and all you hear are complaints.

Some people complain because they have too many gifts. You know people like that: they seem to be good at anything, so they get asked to do a lot of things. They feel so busy. No chance to focus, much less rest. Sometimes they say their gift feels like a punishment. Solomon from the Bible was punished with the gift. The Bible says that Solomon's sins were greater than the sins of his father, David, so God punished Solomon with a greater punishment. What was it? God gave Solomon everything he ever wanted. What a blow! To get sick from eating too much dessert.

Sometimes people need to prove that they have a gift. They need constant applause and reassurance.

Earning the name "Charlie Hustle" during spring exhibitions of his rookie year, Pete Rose became one of the greatest baseball players the game has known. Three World Series rings, three batting titles, 17 appearances as an All-Star, playing in five different positions, Rose remains the all-time Major League leader in hits. He was "Charlie Hustle" because something inside the man could never cease from proving himself, so that everything, *everything* was a win-or-die competition. The gambling which banned him from baseball and membership in the Hall of Fame was only one expression that compelled Rose to prove that he was the best, a winner, that he had it.

The night before the 1970 All-Star game, Pete Rose had dinner with his friend, Ray Fosse, a catcher for the Oakland Athletics in the American League. In those years, the All-Star game was essentially an exhibition event, "for entertainment purposes only". The final score affected nothing at all. In the 12th inning, when the Cubs' Jim Hickman singled to center with Rose on second, Fosse stood at home watching the hopelessly late throw from center fielder. Still, Rose, a step away from scoring the winning run, viciously plowed into Fosse. The collision separated Fosse's shoulder and some say essentially ended the career of the rising young catcher. Decades later, while signing autographs, Rose shrugged and proclaimed that all he'd done that day was start a controversy that made Fosse famous. Was Pete Rose one of baseball's greatest players? Without doubt. Every day, every game, every play, Rose had to prove it to you. What shall you do with the gift?

You could, of course, use it for yourself. It is, after all, *your* gift. You should be the first to benefit from what is your right.

I pulled up to a Burger King drive-thru window, paid my tab, thanked the drive-thru woman for her work, and pulled the small bag of food into my car. Once I began to unwrap the chicken sandwich, I noticed the brand marketing printed on the thin, grease-resistant paper. "You have the right to have things your way," it read. "The right to a sandwich just how you want it. The right to eat it fast. The right to eat it slow. The right to start your own sandwich etiquette school. The right to have a one-man sandwich eating contest." Only in America is one reminded of one's right to eat a chicken sandwich

If society is built on the notion that we possess rights given to us at birth, why bother to express thanks? Gratitude becomes completely superfluous when life is an entitlement instead of a gift. Why feel gratitude or a deep sense of obligation to others if you have only received what you deserve? Is that what to do with the gift?

I talked with Jesus about it. "Lord, I'm not destitute; my children don't go to bed hungry. I'm not wealthy. I can't throw money around, but I do have some things. Lord, what shall I do with the gift?"

"What gift?" he asked. Start there.

Until you're in touch with how much you've been given, you're going to feel needy.

I can't believe what we find to get frustrated about these days. I did a Back-to-the-Future time trip last week; landed in 1917, a mere century ago. "Sorry I didn't call first," I apologized to my ancestors. "My cell phone connections are so bad. And the ATM was out of cash, so I had to stop at another bank. Then my flight boarded 20 minutes late and we sat on the runway for forty minutes before takeoff." "You flew through the air, like a bird?" "Not like a bird, much faster than that." "You talked through your little finger to someone who was in a different room?" "Well, actually, they were in a different city."

We have been so gifted. Our lives are filled with gifts. What do I do with the gift? Try being grateful. When you start with being grateful, everything else falls into place. Into a beautiful place.

The leadership at this church want us to go into our future boldly, with courage and expectation about what God has next for us. The only way for that to happen is for us to be aware of how gifted we've been. God has been incredibly generous to us. Let's open our eyes to the most obvious, evident, recognizable truth in the world: God has been incredibly generous to each one of us, and when we consider "us" together, God's generosity goes through the roof.

We can be grateful. And we can be confident that God is not going out of business. That is the way, the only way, that we can go into the future boldly.

We've been dreaming of what God wants from us in the next few years. For those dreams to be accomplished, we'll need to be bold. And all of us will need to be generous. That's my assignment. I'm supposed to talk to you about giving generously.

There's only one way to get there: the way of gratitude. You look at your life and you realize, "I've been so blessed. God has been incredibly generous. What can I do to show how grateful I am?" In other words, what shall you do with the gift? There are several answers, but only one that works. People who are grateful are happier than people who are not grateful. I have never known a stingy person who was happy.

Gratitude turns into generosity. Gratitude that becomes generosity produces joy. You can give it. You can give it so that others have reason to feel grateful, so gratitude spreads and the world slowly becomes a joyful place rather than an angry and fearful place. You can give it and know the satisfaction that your gifts are making a difference in people's lives. Responding to your own gifted past, you can give in a way that creates a bold future. What shall you do with the gift?

1. The title and introductory material for this sermon came from Fred Craddock, in a presentation made to the Festival of Homiletics in May, 2009.
2. From www.dallasnews.com