

God's Gift to Us
Genesis 1:31-2:3
June 21, 2009
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I have a very large goal for the sermon series we are beginning today. I hope nothing less than that the substance of this series will change the way we look at life. I'm sure I'm overshooting here. A sermon is just a sermon and several of them in a row are not likely to redirect thought patterns that have been entrenched in our minds for years. And yet, people have been changed by lesser things.

Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not professing to have had an original thought. It is not my intention to found a new philosophy, religion or cult. I am very aware of the pitfalls of setting myself up as a guru to follow. I agree with critic John Sauguet who said, "Sit at the feet of the master long enough, and they'll start to smell."

I'm under no illusion that I have achieved some spiritual breakthrough that I must now share with you. Ram Dass, the man who sought spiritual enlightenment in everything from an ashram in India to a trip on LSD with Timothy Leary, recently said, "A person who says, 'I'm enlightened,' probably isn't."

So why am I presumptuous enough to state such a goal for a summer, sermon series? Because I believe that often, the depth of our need causes God to act in life changing ways. Our need for a new way of looking at life is immense; maybe this is one of those times when God will act to help us.

Providence, I believe, might have something to do with the timing of this sermon. Most fathers need the gift of a new way of looking at life. For all the changes that have occurred in the role of fathers in our society, some basics of paternal obligation have remained the same. Responsibility dominates the agenda of most men. We feel the duty to provide the lion share of our families economic support, to nurture our children, to please our wives, to satisfy our bosses and to volunteer for those tasks traditionally accomplished by men at the church, on the sports' teams and in the community.

As a result, our perspective on life may become almost fully task-oriented. Of course this is not solely a male malady. Women, too, may evaluate their lives according to whether they did everything expected of them in their waking hours. The question, "Who needs what, now?" often looms over every adult's day. We all need a fresh way of looking at life, not as a test or obligation or responsibility, but as a gift.

The truth that life is a gift is one of the first messages taught in Scripture. The first chapter of Genesis provides a beautiful treatment of the wonder of creation. Day by day, new miracles unfold until human beings are fashioned by God and the Creator stands back and admires the cosmos. Looking out over the masterpiece born of God's genius, the Lord says, "it is very good." Then, like an artisan proud of the pinnacle of her creative endeavors, the Lord God blesses all creation and rests.

I always picture my grandmother when I read this passage. In the summertime, she invited all her children and grandchildren to Louisiana for a visit. The men and boys went fishing at the break of dawn and while we were gone, my grandmother went to work. She'd fry chicken, or make a pot roast, bake a ham or boil a hen for chicken and dumplings. While the meat cooked, she'd season a pot of greens, snap string beans, whip potatoes and cut carrots. Once she was satisfied she had enough vegetables to go with the main course, Maw maw mixed the batter for cornbread and rolled out the dough for dessert. By about one-thirty, she was pulling the blackberry cobbler from the oven and dumping the wheel of cornbread out of her cast iron skillet.

When all the food was ready, the men would wash up from fishing and everyone would sit at the longest table I'd ever seen and eat until we could eat no more. Everyone would help clear the table and wash the dishes and then my grandmother would pull her rocking chair in front of the window air conditioner, fold her hands over her apron, smile, nod once or twice and drift off to sleep. She slept the rest of a master cook, proud of her wondrous creation.

We kids would drift out to the back porch to play games and watch t.v. and all the other adults would spread out on beds and couches and floors throughout the house and nap. When they awakened, they would verbally replay the meal like it was beautiful dream. "Did you taste those mashed potatoes? What does she put in them to make them so good? Well what about the corn bread, I try and try and cannot make it crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside. How does she do it? I hope you didn't eat all that cobbler, I'm going to sneak back in there in a few minutes for a cup of coffee and another taste." No one ever had to tell us, in those moments anyway, that life was a gift.

My grandmother used to listen to all the commendations and then say a sentence I've not heard anyone else ever say. She'd beam and agree, "It was larapin good wasn't it." Larapin is not in the dictionary, but I think it meant, my creation was very good. Genesis says the Lord created the beauty, variety and majesty of life, gave it to our ancestors and said, "it is larapin good isn't it" and it was, and it is.

Thirty-four year old Christian revolutionary Shane Claiborne says he no longer thinks Christ died to make bad people good. Instead, he says, Christ died to make dead people live again. Claiborne is clear in his book Irresistible Revolution that although he believes God will take us to heaven when we die, the resurrection from death to life begins on this side of the grave. According to Claiborne, once we begin to see life as a gift from God, a gift we get to share with others, we come alive.

What if we taught our children about Jesus not in order to make them good and obedient and manageable, but to make them more fully conscious of God's wondrous gift of life? What if we saw worship, not as an obligation or religious duty, but as the time each week in which we allow God to bring us more fully alive? What if we entered every moment of each day, not with a commitment to meet all the demands and pass all the tests, but with an openness to receive the gift God desires for us to celebrate? Would that not change our lives?

Nikos Kazantzakis wrote Zorba the Greek, The Last Temptation of Christ and God's Pauper, the Life of St. Francis of Assisi, along with a dozen travel journals describing the beauty of many of the most exotic places on earth. In an attempt to express his faith, the brilliant writer said, "God changes appearances every second. Blessed is the man who can recognize him in all his disguises. One moment he is in a glass of fresh water; the next, your son bouncing on your knees, or an enchanting woman, or perhaps merely a morning walk."

I believe God is separate from creation so I translate the quote to mean that God's gifts come to us in every breath. Sometimes the gift is a glass of water, at other times it is the son bouncing on my knee or an enchanting woman or a morning walk. The reason I asked you to bring samples of God's gifts this morning is to help us see as concretely as possible that our lives are adorned by the Lord's astonishing generosity. Every day is a gift; every moment is a gift.

I've been trying to practice what I preach, but I fail more mornings than I succeed. Unfortunately, I've been endowed with a very critical mind. I can see the flaws in any plan, the deficiencies in any person, the mistakes in any work, the disappointments in any relationship and the massive inadequacies inside my own skin. More than likely, it will take awhile for me to learn a new way of looking at the world. The good news is I have begun. Each morning I tell myself "My life is a gift from God and this day is a gift from God." Then I ask the Lord, "What is the gift in this moment?" Sometimes the answer is breakfast, or a good morning kiss from my wife or the luxury of reading the

morning paper. Other days it is a shower, a short conversation with my children, a tune that lifts my spirit, a poem or passage of Scripture. Throughout the day, I revisit the question as I transition from one experience to another. As I drive to make a hospital visit or help coach a little league game or mow the yard or write a sermon, I ask myself, "What is the gift in this moment?"

Like I said, I am a slow learner, but I think I sense a few changes. When we look at life as a gift of God, other transforming questions arise. If all creation is a gift, then we too are gifts. What gifts do we bring to each moment? When you enter this sanctuary, what gifts do you bring? When you pass the peace, what gifts do you offer? When you gather with your family for a meal, visit with a friend, volunteer at your kid's school, punch in at work, what gift do you bring? Do you see how different a question that is from "what do I have to do? What is expected? What is my obligation, my duty? To approach all of life with the question "what gift do I bring to this event, person or opportunity?" can change our lives. We will examine this aspect of a changing perspective on life next week.

In future weeks, we will look at famous people in the Bible and see how God taught them life was a gift. Hopefully, we will benefit from each person's experience. Adam and Eve will learn they have received many blessings from God and have wondrous gifts to return to their creator. They will also discover that some gifts aren't their's to take. Moses will learn that it is his presence, not his performance that makes him a gift to this world. Paul will discover that there are gifts even in his most painful experiences. Elijah will find out that sometimes we miss God's gifts because we are so focused on our own agendas and ambitions. David will come to know that all God's gifts are eternal in nature. Ruth and her extended family will see that they are wondrous gifts to each other, while Esther will learn that her gifts are even greater than she imagined.

Last week, I had an experience that showed me how deeply we need a new way of looking at life. For fifteen years, Congregations United, the agency we support so people in our community with financial needs can receive help, obtained a grant for almost \$18,000. I've been the president of this organization for a long time and every time we have met, we have grieved over the fact that the need is so much greater than our meager resources. Time after time, we have wistfully said, "If we could only get a grant."

We have been applied for various grants repeatedly. On each occasion, we have either been turned down or sent a very meager amount of money. Finally, after years of frustration, we landed what for us is a sizable grant. Monday, our executive director announced the good news. Did we praise God for the Lord's generosity? Did we shout hallelujah for answered prayer? The words were barely out of the director's mouth and one board member said, "this is going to require a lot of paperwork." Another grumbled, "we are going to be audited now for sure." A third read the award letter and said, "well, this money can't be used for everybody."

On and on the negativity poured forth. As I listened, I thought, we are in severe need of a change of outlook. What happened at that board meeting, occurs every day, in a myriad ways in our lives. Our need is great and that is why I believe God may respond and at least help us evolve a little toward a more blessed way of looking at life.

My hopes for this sermon series are outlandish, audacious, in some ways ridiculous, but I am not going to back down. When the summer has come to an end, I hope, we will see our lives as gifts from God. If so, we will be walking lighter, loving more freely and shining with joy. We will pull our rocking chairs over beneath the window air conditioner, take in all that God has done for us and say, "it is larapin good, isn't it."