

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 12:1-4  
Acts 17:22-28  
Revelation 2:17

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson  
October 14, 2007

### The Gifts of God for the People of God

There are two terrific things about gifts: receiving them and giving them.

This morning I want to introduce our reflections about gifts with this painting, which is also on the bulletin insert. It was painted by Sieger Köder, a German artist and Roman Catholic Priest. The title is "Covenant (Abraham. Die Nacht von Hebron)." In a literal sense, this is an illustration of the first lesson we heard this morning, the beginning of the great story of Abraham and his descendants. In another sense, though, this is a work of art that invites us into dialogue with what we see, what we feel, and what we imagine.

So we begin this morning by letting this painting be our "visual word," our text for the eyes, just as the scripture passage was our text for our ears.

- What part of this painting draws you first?
- Where do your eyes rest?
- If you squint your eyes (to blur the image), what color do you see?
- What mood are you feeling? Is it the same mood at the person in the painting?

Let's take this a step farther, and let this painting be our "embodied word," our text for our flesh. Look at the posture of the person in the painting; notice that the man's arms are extended and his hands are open. If you have room in your pew, extend *your* arms downward and open *your* hands.

Like the figure in the painting, you are now in a gift-receiving posture. This is the stance of Abram when God promises to make of him a great nation, and to make him a blessing. This is our stance as the children of God, offspring who are also promised blessings from God. [*You can relax again.*]

There is a tendency, at least in our Western Culture, to slip into believing that we must earn God's love. In truth, though, God's love always comes first. It is instructive to remember that in the New Testament, Jesus almost always offers food, drink, and hospitality to his followers before he sends them out into the world. When he preaches the Sermon on the Mount, the blessings come first. Even at the beginning of the world, as it is described in Genesis, God begins by pronouncing a blessing over all that has been created. The blessing comes first.

The blessing comes first in our own spiritual journeys, too. For many of us, this comes in the form of baptism when we are infants – and have done nothing to deserve being

welcome into the community of faith, nothing to bring down the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing to merit God's blessing. And yet, there it is, freely given. The gift comes first.

St. Paul preached this message to the citizens of Athens: God *"gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."* [Acts 17:25] And then he goes on to say, [God] *"allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us."* [Acts 17:26b-27] Even the desire to search for meaning and question God, even the curious combination of skepticism and hope that we come to church with – all of these are themselves gifts from God. The gifts come first.

The mystical book of Revelation reminds us that the gifts each person receives are unique. In the words of today's reading, God says *"I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."* [Revelation 2:17b] I don't think the new name is just a label; I believe that it speaks of our singular identity – an identity grounded in the gifts we each bear.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes this point in another way: *"There are varieties of gifts,"* he writes, *"but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."* [1 Corinthians 12:4-7] Our gifts are not for ourselves alone; they are for the common good. That's what I meant by saying that the second terrific thing about them is giving them away.

One of wisest seminary teachers, Flora Wuellner, makes a distinction between our gifts and our skills. Our gifts are those talents that come easily and bring deep satisfaction and meaning to our lives; when we exercise them, we may become tired, but we do not become exhausted. Skills, on the other hand, are those talents that we develop as disciplines to order our lives and meet our obligations. We may be pleased with what we do with our skills, but if we live only in our skills, we often become exhausted and "burned out."

Giving our gifts, then, is not really giving them "away." The very nature of gifts is that they are most fully lived when they are being exercised, when they are being used. When we do something that we really love doing, and share that with someone else – that's when we are living in our gifts.

When we are living in our gifts, several things follow. We connect with other people and our sense of community grows. If we are attentive to the spiritual nature of our gifts and the ways we are called to use them, we also connect with the Holy, with the Divine. We are, by and large, more productive and more satisfied with what we are doing. Our sense of well-being, in turn, feeds our capacity to be generous and forgiving, to seek healing and reconciliation.

Many of you have heard me say that my wish for the church is that every member would contribute his or her gifts to the faith community. When people are doing what they love to do, what they feel called to do, what gives them deep satisfaction, the whole church is lifted, inspired, and brightened.

And when people are doing what they love to do, other resources follow. New people are drawn to a community where gifts are recognized, celebrated, and shared. We naturally give our time and our money (our calendars and checkbooks) to participate and support such a community. And we grow in hospitality as we learn to recognize and celebrate the gifts of others.

Return to the painting for a moment; this time notice that the figure has lifted his head and his eyes towards the heaven, towards the light that is streaming down on him. Let's assume this posture for a moment or two, and imagine how Abram feels as God blesses him with promises for the future. [pause]

May we receive and pass along God's gifts with the same awe, reverence, and gratitude that we share with Abram this morning. Amen.

Prayer for October 14, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of our hearts and minds, this morning we offer our prayers for those circumstances in our lives that we cannot usually bring ourselves to say aloud. Help us to name before you and one another the disappointments, shames, sorrows, and shortcomings that eat away at our faith and our wellbeing.

We pray for our relationships that are conflicted, dispirited, and unfulfilling.

We pray for those who are troubled about their sexuality, and about their intimate relationships.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with mental illness.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with chronic health conditions.

We pray for everyone who has been betrayed, cheated, or defrauded.

We pray this morning for those who live with addictions and alcoholism.

We pray for those who have lost their employment, or who are employed at work that is demeaning, dangerous, or disheartening.

We pray for those in financial difficulties, whether of their own making or the result of unexpected events.

And we pray for the secrets of our hearts that we can speak only to you.

All of these things we pray in the name of the one who listens with loving attention to all of our sorrows, and who bears them with us, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

*This is a revision of the prayers for May 1, 2005, July 17, 2005, February 5, 2006, April 9, 2006, August 13, 2006, May 20, 2007, and August 19, 2007.*