

“THE GIFT OF EACH OTHER”

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 – Pentecost Sunday

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Today is one of those days when it is hard to know what to preach on. For one thing, this is Pentecost Sunday in our church year. It is the day we remember and celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit which gave birth to the church. Next to Christmas and Easter, it is the third great festival of the church year.

But this is also Mother’s Day in the secular calendar. The day we, as a nation, set aside to celebrate the gifts of mothers. Some of you are here to do just that. You are visiting with mom, taking her out to lunch, letting her know she is special.

And, this is also the day that some churches celebrate as the Festival of the Christian home. A day to lift up family life.

This year, by quirk of the calendars, all three of these fall on the same Sunday. So which do I preach on? The gift of the Spirit, the gift of mothers, the gift of homes?

Or maybe, there is a connection here. In I Corinthians, Paul is writing to a divided church. A church where competition has replaced compassion. Some of the Christians at Corinth thought themselves to be spiritually superior and looked down their noses at others. Paul writes them to remind them that all of them are who they are because of the gift of the Spirit. There are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. “Jew or Greek, slave or free, we all receive the same spirit,” Paul writes.

The gift of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate on Pentecost is what binds us together. It is the Spirit that makes us one family in Christ. God, through the Spirit, has given us to each other, so that together, we can be more than we can be apart. Church recognizes the gift you have in each other, Paul says to the Corinthians. That same message applies to the family. Recognize the gift you have in each other. Celebrate the gifts that God has given you.

The movie, *Walk the Line*, reintroduced me to country western singer Johnny Cash. Cash came from a poor family, his father was an alcoholic. When he was 12 years old, Cash’s older brother Jack was killed in a tragic accident at a saw mill. Cash blamed himself. This was made worse by the fact that his own father told him that God took the wrong son. In his father’s eyes Cash could never do anything right.

This need to find acceptance, to prove himself somehow, was Cash’s demon. When success did not prove enough, he turned to alcohol and drugs. Only later in life did he find any sense of peace. But he never experienced what he needed from his father – never felt gifted or recognized by his family.

Johnny Cash’s experience is echoed by many who are searching for their family’s blessing, longing to be recognized. All of us need to experience ourselves as being accepted, affirmed and loved. Without this sense of blessing, there will be an emptiness in our lives that we try to fill

with all kinds of other things.

Dr. Rachel Remen, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, writes that when he came to visit, her grandfather would often bring her a present. One day he brought her a little paper cup. Remen looked inside expecting to see something special but it was full of dirt. She was not allowed to play with dirt and was disappointed. She told him so. He smiled at her, and then picked up the little teapot from her doll's tea set, took it to the kitchen, filled it with water and handed it to her. He put the little cup in the windowsill and said to her, "If you promise to put some water in this cup every day, something may happen."

She was four at the time and the whole thing made no sense to her. But she promised. At first she was curious to see what happened and did not mind. But as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. After a week, she asked her grandfather if she could stop, and he said, "Everyday."

The second week was harder and she began to resent her promise. When her grandfather came again she tried to give the cup back to him, but he refused to take it, and said simply, "Everyday." It was hard but she kept her promise. And then one morning, there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before. She was astonished. Everyday they got bigger. She could not wait to tell her grandfather. When she did, he explained to her that life was everywhere, hidden in the most unlikely and ordinary places. "And all it needs is water, Grandpa?" she asked. "No," he said, "all it needs is your faithfulness."

It was his way of teaching her that we need to bless the life around us and within us, so that it can grow. To bless another is to recognize the gift of God in them, to give attention to it and strengthen it. Blessings strengthen and feed life. The primary place we need to feel blessed is in our homes, our families.

John Trent and Gary Smalley have written a book on the biblical concept of blessing called, *The Blessing*. "Blessing" is one of the most important words in the Bible, used more than 600 times in the Old Testament alone. In their study, Trent and Smalley have outlined some key elements in conveying family blessing. A family blessing begins with meaningful touch. It continues with a spoken message conveying the value of the person. And, it pictures a special future for the person being blessed.

Meaningful touch is a key element in the Biblical concept of blessing.

Years ago a freelance reporter from the New York Times was interviewing Marilyn Monroe. She knew that Marilyn had lived in many foster homes and so she asked her if she ever felt loved. "Once," Marilyn replied. "When I was about seven or eight the woman I was living with was putting on makeup. She reached over and patted my cheeks with her rouge puff. For that moment, I felt loved by her."

Marilyn had tears in her eyes when she remembered that event. It was such a small act, but it was like pouring buckets of love over the parched life of a little girl starved for affection. Why do you think Marilyn Monroe allowed her body to be exploited in her adult life? Was it only about money or was it about something deeper? Was it because she had never really felt blessed?

When his disciples tried to prevent children from coming near to him, Jesus rebuked his disciples. In fact, it says that he was indignant, ordering the children to be brought to him. And

then it says that he “took them into his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”

In Mark’s Gospel, we have the story of a leper who came to Jesus, falling on his knees, begging Jesus to make him clean. The Gospel says that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man and said, “I am willing, be clean.”

To touch a leper was taboo, they were unclean. And yet the first thing Jesus does, before he says anything, is to touch this man. That touch conveyed a powerful sense of acceptance to a man who was rejected.

Asked how they felt blessed by parents, one young person said, “My father would put his arm around me at church and let me lay my head on his shoulder.”

Beginning when our children were small, Dawn and I knelt beside their bed each night for prayers and we would always place our hands on their heads, or their shoulders, as we said our prayers. When I pray with patients in hospitals, I will almost always hold their hand or place my hand on their forehead. Through touch, we convey a sense of acceptance. We recognize and call forth the gift of each other.

In the same way, we need to recognize the gift of each other through spoken words that convey a sense of another person’s value. Words of affirmation and encouragement are a way we bless and strengthen the life of others.

The word “benediction” – which refers to the final blessing in a service – comes from the Latin *bene*, for good, and *diction*, for saying. To bless someone is to say good things about them. You are good. You are valued. We all need this kind of affirmation to thrive.

When Jesus called the fisherman Simon to be his disciple, he said, from now on your name is Cephas, Peter, which means Rock. Peter was anything but a rock at this point. But Jesus, in using this name, was encouraging, calling forth, conveying a sense of worth to Peter. He saw more in Peter than Peter saw in himself.

When our daughter was small and playing in the Powder Puff Little League, whenever she made a hit or caught a ball, she would look at us. And if we were close enough, she would ask, “Are you proud of me?” She was asking for a blessing.

Someone has said that we should practice the Five A’s: Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Approval, Attention. Words of encouragement and affirmation strengthen life.

Jesuit priest and writer Henri Nouwen spent the last years of his life serving as a chaplain in a community made up of mentally and physically challenged adults. One of his friends there was a handicapped but wonderful, wonderful lady. She said to him one day, “Henri, can you bless me?” Nouwen says he remembers walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead. She said, “Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean.” I was embarrassed and said, “I gave you a blessing.” She said, “No, I want to be blessed.” I kept thinking, “What does she mean?”

They had a little service and all these people were sitting there. After the service Nouwen said, “Janet wants a blessing.” He had an alb on and a long robe with long sleeves. Janet walked up to me and said, “I want to be blessed.” She put her head against my chest and I spontaneously put my arms around her, held her and looked right into her eyes and said, “Blessed are you, Janet.

You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are." She looked at me and said, "Yes, yes, yes, I know." I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed. She went back to her place and immediately other people said, "I want that kind of blessing, too." The people kept walking up to me and I suddenly found myself embracing people.

I remember that after that, one of the people in our community who assists the handicapped, a strong guy, a football player, said, "Henri, can I have a blessing, too?" I remember our standing there in front of each other and I said, "John," and I put my hand on his shoulder, "you are blessed. You are a good person. God loves you. We love you. You are important."

We convey a blessing through spoken words that express the value of another.

A blessing also pictures a special future for the person being blessed. It gives them a sense of hope and something to look forward to. A blessing serves as a headlight into the future.

When Jacob blesses Isaac, he says, "Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you." (Genesis 27:28)

When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus replies, "On this rock I will build my church...." He pictured a future for Peter which Peter could not have pictured for himself. .

When I was a senior in college, a member of the church where I was working as a youth director, pulled me aside and encouraged me to apply for a Rotary Fellowship for a year's study abroad. It was not something I had thought of, or even something I thought I would have a chance at. But he told me, you can do it. So I applied and was awarded the fellowship. All because he had blessed me by picturing a future for me.

Picturing a special future for a child, a spouse or a friend can bring out the best in their lives. It lets them know that someone believes in them and surrounds them with hope and possibility. It recognizes the gift of God within them, the potentials that God has placed in their lives waiting to be realized.

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, guess who it was that stood up and boldly began to preach to the crowds. It was Peter! Peter who had promised never to desert Jesus, but when the time came, he not only fled, he cursed and denied even knowing Jesus. This Peter who had failed so completely, must have felt like running away. What prevented him? I think it was the special future Jesus had seen in him. "Peter, you are the rock. I am counting on you to build my church. And he became a rock, and he did build the church.

A blessing begins with meaningful touch. It continues with a spoken message conveying the value of the person, and it pictures a special future for the person being blessed.

"To each is given a gift of the Spirit, for the common good," Paul wrote. Through learning to bless each other, we recognize, affirm and strengthen the gift that God has placed within us.