

## GIFTS THAT KEEP ON GIVING

Series: The “Re” Words

I Peter 4: 7-11, Acts 3: 1-10

All Saints’ Sunday

November 5, 2017

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Over the last two months, we have been using “re” words, words that begin with re, to talk about faith and discipleship. Today is our last “re” day and our final word is *re-gift*. Re-gifting elicits different responses from different people. Some see it as a good way to pass on something nice, maybe even special, to another who will like and appreciate it. Some see it as a way to pass on an unwanted gift to someone who might want it. Some see it as a way to pass off a hated gift to anyone who will take it. There is truth in all of these perspectives. Some gifts, for instance, are passed from generation to generation. When you hear, “My grandfather gave this to my father who gave it to me and now I am giving it to you,” then you know you are receiving a treasure that you will keep and re-gift to the next generation. You might receive a gift you know is being re-gifted, but you don’t care because you really do like it. They are re-gifting because it was not their color, or it didn’t fit, or they already had one, or they have no room for it, or they just don’t like it, but you like it or need it and are glad to have it re-gifted to you. Then there are the white elephants. In my extended family there are a few gifts that have been received that make pretty much anyone say, “Oh.” We have a bad habit of re-gifting these items to each other over and over again. The rules are that you cannot give it back to the one who gave it to you without other recipients in between, and if you are the recipient, you cannot refuse it. So, you graciously accept it and wait for the next opportunity to pass it on to another family member. This goes on for years. I have been re-gifted with the same item several times over the course of a few decades. Presently I am not in possession of any of these items so I am not looking forward to Christmas. Perhaps you have been re-gifted or you are a re-gifter. How you feel about that probably depends on the gift.

The Lord gives us gifts that are given specifically and particularly to each of us. But here is what is interesting about them. God’s gifts to us are intended to be re-gifted. Normally our desire is for someone to like and keep what we give them. Have you ever given a household item to someone and looked for that item the next time you visited? Have you ever pulled something from the closet and put it out because the person who gave it to you was coming over? Be honest. I overheard a conversation in which a woman was complimenting another woman on her jacket. She said, “You look great in that jacket. You know, I gave that exact jacket to a friend for her birthday, but I have never seen her

wear it.” The other responded, “I don’t know why. I love it. And the best thing is I got it for just a few dollars at the thrift shop.” The silence that followed was telling as the one woman realized why she never saw her friend wearing her gift. She did not look happy. We want others to like and keep our gifts.

God, though, wants us to re-gift them. The different apostles often spoke about the gifts of God and always made the point that they were to be used for the good of the body. Indeed, Paul became angry with the Corinthians because some were claiming to be more important than others because, in their minds, they had more important gifts. That’s ridiculous, Paul told them. All gifts are intended for the upbuilding of all. Your gift is worthless if you do not re-gift it. In our lesson today, Peter wrote: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

This suggests two things to me. First, we need to know what gifts we have; in other words, know with what God has blessed us. Claiming these gifts is not being arrogant. It is important. It is the sign of how God wants us to serve. I have often told you that it was my intention to be a marine biologist when I went to college. It is what I wanted to do. After taking some of the appropriate course work and when I honestly assessed the situation, it was clear that God had not gifted me with a scientific mind, the kind that would be needed to meet my goals. I wasn’t being humble. I was being honest with myself. Ah, a friend who had known me a long time pointed out that as early as 14, 15, 16, I could speak in church, interpreting scripture and theology just as easily and naturally as getting dressed in the morning. That was my gift. That was helpful. Seeing the gift was a major clue about how God intended for me to serve.

Some of you would not stand up here to deliver a message for all of the tea in China. But you are amazing in a Sunday School classroom or a Vacation Bible School booth working with children, or you can sing like an angel in the choir, or you are a master administrator, or you can produce a sumptuous Wednesday night dinner, or you have a natural way of counseling others. God has gifted each one of us, and we should receive those gifts with thanks and own them.

And after we receive them, we should re-gift them. A preacher who never preaches is of no help to God or the body. A teacher who never enters a classroom, a cook who stays out of the kitchen, an administrator who shies away from the office, or a counselor who doesn’t speak on-on-one with others is of no help to God or the body.

I like our story from Acts today. Peter and John were on the way to the temple and passed a lame beggar on the street. He asked them for money. Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you.” What the man was asking for Peter did not have. He did, however, have a gift to share with him. In this case, it was the gift of healing. He told the lame man to stand up and walk, and the man did. Now, granted, getting his

legs back was way better than getting a few coins in his cup, but that's not the point. The point is that Peter gave what he had. He had the gift of healing which is fantastic. But he just as easily might have had the gift of compassion and, even though he would not have had any money to give the man and could not restore his legs, he could have sat with him for a while and offered comfort and friendship. How often did anyone give this man the time of day? He might have had the time and strength to help the man get to and from his home to the place where he asked for alms. He might have had the ability to fix him a meal. He might have had the political savvy to lobby for better health care or a social system on behalf of the man so he would not have to beg. I don't have silver or gold but I will give you what I have. That is taking God's gifts and re-gifting them for the benefit of others.

Today is our All Saints' celebration. It seems to me that when we talk about the saints, that is the attribute that makes us call them saints. When you read the stories of canonized saints in the Roman Catholic tradition, or the stories of those we might consider saint-like in our own understanding of what that means, what stands out is that almost to a person they are very ordinary people. They may not have started out being particularly religious or even particularly moral, although eventually they got there. What makes them stand out is that at some point they grasped the gift or gifts God had given them and then faithfully re-gifted – giving to others what had first been given to them. Sometimes it was mercy, sometimes leadership, sometimes wealth, sometimes foot-washing-type of service, sometimes faith, sometimes acceptance, sometimes teaching and preaching, sometimes scholarly guidance, you name it. Whatever the gift, they shared it liberally and lavishly, holding nothing back and because of it, others were blessed and their lives were better.

When you re-gift you just never know what can happen. You probably know that Elizabeth Ann Seton was the first native-born citizen of the United States to become a canonized saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Her official sainthood is pretty new – 1975, especially considering that she lived in the late 1700s, early 1800s. You might know her name because the work she did to become a saint took place in Emmitsburg, right up the road. You can visit her shrine there.

Elizabeth did not grow up in Emmitsburg, Maryland. She actually grew up in New York. Her father was a well-to-do, prominent doctor there. She was raised in high society and, interestingly, as an Episcopalian. She married into a well-to-do family and had children and continued her high-society lifestyle. She experienced several losses, including financial loss and the loss of family, and she converted to Catholicism. Long story short, she came to Emmitsburg at the urging of the Sulpician Fathers who were busy establishing Mt. St. Mary's College and St. Mary's Seminary. Her upbringing providing her a good education and the refinements of higher society such as speaking French and

playing the piano. Using her gifts, she began a girls' school, organized women to work with the poor, and founded the Sisters of Charity. She did all of this in a short time, living only to 46. The Sisters continued her work founding schools, orphanages and hospitals. The work carries on today.

St. Elizabeth had both great opportunities and great hardships. Her life took twists and turns, many unwanted and difficult. In that sense, she was no different from you or me. She was a regular person with a regular life. All she did was give what she had, applying the gifts God had given her. As a result, thousands, at this point hundreds of thousands, have received care, education, and medical attention.

"I don't have silver or gold, but I'll give you what I have." "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." Over these next few weeks we will be talking about being salt and light in response to Jesus telling us that we are salt – that which seasons and light – that which illuminates. This is a significant calling. How do we do that? All Saints' Day shows us a way. Re-gift. In this context, it really is a good thing. Think about those who have re-gifted you and what that has meant for you. Follow their model and re-gift others so that they may benefit. For whom might you be salt and light? God bless us to that end.

Amen.