

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalms 124

Romans 12: 1-8

Matthew 16: 13-20

A GIFT FROM GOD

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Sermon for August 23, 2020

Summary: What makes a good gift for the newly born.

I've never actually raised any children from scratch myself, so naturally I have strong opinions on how it is to be done. When it comes to the whole question of giving gifts to children, for example, there are certain rules I believe should be followed.

One is that children should receive no more than three gifts a year, one on his or her birthday, and two at Christmas, provided they've been good.

Another has to do with the quality of the gifts they should be given, and here there is a very strict requirement: the gifts must be durable, and by that I mean that they should not be made of plastic, they should not require batteries or electronic components of any sort, and they should be able to survive a drop from at least three feet, and still be able to function properly.

To move on to the qualities of good gifts that speak a little more to our Gospel reading for this morning, I'll note that the gifts should answer to some basic and valuable interest of childhood. Children, for example, are naturally interested in imaginative play.

I remember once being in a takeout place in Byron, where I ordered a piece of pizza for lunch. There was some kind of delay in getting the order out that day, and as I stood to one side at the counter, I watched a little boy

behind the counter in the cooking area. He was sitting on the floor over a drainage grate, and he had a couple of plastic utensils, and he was carefully maneuvering these utensils around on the grate, muttering little words of commentary, lost in his own imaginings, completely oblivious to the grownups who were walking around him back there, getting the lunch orders ready.

And who hasn't seen children like that, spending hours manipulating little figurines of one kind or another, assigning names and biographies to each, and giving them imaginative life in an imaginative world.

Another requirement is that they should be foundational for something else.

The natural rhythm of childhood is to build up from the basic to the more complicated. Babies learn *Mama* and *Papa* first, and other nouns follow, and then verbs and adjectives and conjunctions and so on. *Mama* and *Papa* are fine in themselves, but their true value and significance is that they provide the foundation to build on. Every single baby ever born follows that evolution.

Similarly with walking. First the flop, then the crawl, then the toddle, then the walk and finally the run. It's cute to see a baby crawl, but it's an occasion for cheers and applause when the baby takes that first step.

Those natural elements of childhood are what persuade me that toys should also somehow harmonize with that natural rhythm, and should always be foundational for other toys, should be, so to say, forward looking.

Some of you may think I'm being a little unrealistic here, and you're probably right. I can only repeat that I'm speaking from a position of a total lack of experience in the real world, and what I'm offering here is not meant to describe what is, but rather what might be. And as such I think it provides a suitable introduction to our Gospel reading for today.

Matthew 16: 13-20

The heart of this passage is the recognition on the part of Peter that Jesus, this young man standing in front of him, is not just the long-awaited Messiah, the long

awaited savior of the Jewish national aspirations – but that this young man stands in a unique and very special relationship to the one God Himself. The phrase Peter uses is Son of God although at this point the full meaning of the truth expressed by that phrase would not be grasped by Peter or anyone else until after the events of the Passion and Resurrection and Ascension and, most of all, of Pentecost.

But it is the vital first realization, however immature, that Peter had to receive, and which all Christians must also receive and accept, as the genesis of the new birth. Recognition of the divinity – not of the magnificence, not of the power, not of the wisdom, not of the goodness – but of the divinity of Jesus is the doorway God needs to hand us the gift of a new life.

And that’s exactly what Jesus says in His response. “You’ve been blessed, Simon,” he says, “you’ve been blessed by a revelation from God. Human reasoning can’t arrive at my divinity: that can only be a gift from God.”

A gift from God. The new life that begins once we recognize the divinity of Christ is a gift from God.

As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians: *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old [life] has passed away; behold, a new [life] has begun.”* (5: 17)

And if we recognize that it is the first gift of the new Christian life, I think we can see how it satisfies at least a couple of the requirements for perfect childhood gifts we discussed earlier.

The first is that it appeals to the creative imagination.

Elsewhere in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul puts it this way: *We live by faith, not by sight.*

Christianity is otherworldly, not only in the sense that it assures us of a life beyond death in the dominions of God, but also, and perhaps for our present concerns even more importantly, because it asks us to reimagine this world, the world we live in.

Christianity teaches a way of life that is utterly unlike the ways of life we learn from most of our worldly sources. It is a life characterized by humility, unqualified forgiveness, mutual respect, self-sacrifice, and unshakable trust in God. It asks us to attend church and to support the church and to encourage others to worship with us. It teaches us to spend time in reading the Word and in prayer. It asks us to participate in Communion on a regular basis.

Is this a sort of life ear-marked for worldly success? Almost certainly not, if your criteria for worldly success are the same ones most of the world uses: fame, fortune and power. Despite the assurances of a certain variety of popular preaching, the promised rewards of the Christian life are not measured by dollar signs, but rather by their degree of conformity to the model of Christ.

I recently saw a commercial for a Caribbean resort picturing people lounging on beach chairs with cocktails and waiters with bow ties bringing them various food delicacies, and the catchphrase for the commercial was that this place was a little bit of heaven on earth. But this wasn't heaven on earth. This was earth imposing itself on heaven. If you really want to see heaven on earth, look at aides in nursing homes, look at parents sacrificing their time for their children, look at secret Santas and people mowing their neighbors' lawns without fanfare or fuss.

The gift of the new life is the gift of seeing the world, not as it is, but as it might be, and living one's own life a citizen of that imaginary world, with as much commitment and lack of self-consciousness as that little boy playing with plastic utensils on a drainage grate behind a lunch counter. We live by faith, not by sight.

And the gift of the new life is also foundational to something much greater and more substantial. Consider again our children's toys. You give a child a toy car, say, or a ragdoll. Why? So they can begin the long and laborious process of preparing themselves for a world full of mechanical devices and family responsibilities. Cooking a mud pie is a first step on the path that leads to cooking a Thanksgiving dinner. Pushing a toy car around the living room floor is a first step on the way to engineering a rocket ship to Mars. Flipping through an alphabet book is a first step towards writing a novel.

In the same way, the new life, being born again with its fresh perspectives and rules and habits, is the first step on the long process of preparation for what heaven has to offer. In heaven, there are almost certainly no Caribbean resorts with beach chairs and fizzy cocktails with little umbrellas sticking out of them. Those skilled in accumulating vast wealth or lying to people for their vote or patting themselves on the back or spreading malicious gossip will not find their skill of much use in heaven. On the contrary, they will have to begin at the beginning.

The gift of the new life resulting from the recognition of the divinity of Christ is the gift of a foundation upon which the never-ending process of growing into a worthy and appreciative citizen of heaven can be built.

And so our prayer this morning, heavenly Father, is a prayer of gratitude for the gift of the new life resulting from the recognition of the divinity of Christ, the gift of a foundation we could not have built ourselves, the gift of the directions for modeling our lives after that of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.