

GIFTS IN THE ATTIC

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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2 Kings 4:38-44; John 6:1-21

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

John 6:5b

After the funeral, when the nieces and nephews finally went through Aunt Sally’s apartment, they found the strangest thing. Way up in the attic bedroom that no one ever entered (the one behind the dormer window), they discovered a treasure-trove of gifts. Each present was wrapped in cheerful, colored paper, and circled with shimmering ribbon — the ends teased into spirals by a scissors-blade.

There were literally dozens of wrapped presents: some stacked neatly against the walls, others piled high on the cushions of the old sofa. Still others were strewn across the Persian rug in the center of the floor, right where Aunt Sally must have knelt to wrap them.

As for the wrapping paper, some of it was decades old. The colored corners of the boxes were worn away to whiteness. The paper itself was brittle and yellowed.

When the nieces and nephews opened one or two of the older boxes, and turned back the crinkly tissue paper, they found clothing that harkened back to earlier eras — things no one would dream of wearing today.

Aunt Sally had missed her chance with those presents! Some items within the boxes qualified as genuine antiques. One box contained an original Mickey Mouse watch (like the one cousin Matthew asked for, even prayed for, one Christmas, when he was still a kid). There was a record album by the Turtles, in its original wrapper (Melissa had always liked that group). There was a Duncan Yo-Yo, complete with instructions on how to finesse a “cat’s cradle” and an

“around-the world.” There was even a lava lamp, still in its original box.

Once they recovered from their astonishment, the family had but one question: Why? Did Aunt Sally have a strange phobia — a creeping terror of being caught empty-handed one birthday or Christmas? Or did she simply have a shopping habit that was way out of control?

Whatever her reasons, through all the decades she lived in that rambling, Victorian-gingerbread house, Aunt Sally stockpiled presents like there was no tomorrow.

All of them Aunt Sally dutifully brought home and wrapped — but for what purpose? Many of her gifts did find their way to family members — but as for the rest? It was a mystery...

As Aunt Sally’s survivors stood at the door of the attic bedroom, wondering at her secret hoard, they felt more than a little sad. Those gaily-colored, ribbon-festooned packages seemed almost like orphans. An air of tragedy hovered about that room, a faded glory like the yellowed pattern of the wallpaper.

Some would commend Aunt Sally for her planning and foresight; but most would conclude that, as a gift-giver, she’d missed the mark. Aunt Sally’s warehousing was spectacular; her distribution system left a lot to be desired.

Truly, there's something sad — even tragic — about an unopened gift. What’s true of toys and trinkets is even more true of spiritual gifts.

The Bible is full of spiritual gifts: the Apostle Paul, in particular, talks about them a great deal. In at least three places in his letters, Paul lays out impressive lists of what he calls “gifts of the Spirit.” Some of these lists sound like positions in the want-ads:

apostle,
prophet,
evangelist,

**pastor,
teacher.**

Others seem more fluid — what we'd call “talents,” really:

**speaking wisdom,
keeping faith,
healing the sick,
working miracles,
interpreting what the Spirit is saying.**

Paul has this peculiar notion that each of us, every one, is gifted by the Holy Spirit for ministry — that we all have our talents, to discover and apply in the service of Jesus Christ, whether inside the church or beyond it.

The question is: how good a job are each of us doing at finding these special talents, and using them, to God's glory?

As a way of digging into that question, I want to take you to a hillside in Galilee. Journey with me, to that place where the crowd of 5,000 is gathered at Jesus' feet.

The itinerant rabbi from Nazareth is enjoying phenomenal success. But success brings with it certain nagging questions, of a practical nature....

How, for example, are all these people going to be fed? Napoleon quipped that armies “march on their stomachs.” If he's right, then Jesus had better find himself some logistical officers, and pronto — that is, if he intends to have this army of disciples following him over hill and dale.

First he turns to Philip, a man who evidently has a great head for figures. No sooner does Jesus mention the need, than Philip whips out a detailed cost analysis. “No can do, boss,” he concludes, shaking his head. “The numbers don't lie. There's not nearly enough”

In every army, there are quartermasters....and there are quartermasters. Some can keep the books like there's no tomorrow, and others — well, let's just say their talents lie in other areas. There are some people in every organization who just know where to find things — so long as you don't ask too many questions.

Andrew, it seems, is one of those people. While Philip's burning up the calculator buttons (or the cuneiform tablet, as the case may be), Andrew's out working the crowd. He doesn't come up with much, but what he's got he brings to Jesus: a boy, with his picnic lunch of five barley loaves and two fish.

In Jesus' day, barley loaves are the food of the poorest of the poor. They weren't big, those loaves: maybe the size of a small pita bread, or a tortilla. Three of them was the typical serving for one person.

The fish the boy's carrying are a particular kind. The Greek word *opsarion* means “very small fish” — probably something like sardines. Jesus says, “Get me 5,000 box lunches to go” — and Andrew comes back with a kid and his sardine sandwich.

Meager as his pickings are, Andrew's still one up on Philip. (You can't eat an inventory statement.) As it turns out, those five barley loaves and two fish are all Jesus needs....

He starts breaking the bread and tearing apart the fish, and before the afternoon is over, everyone's eaten — with twelve baskets of leftovers besides! The number twelve is significant: it calls to mind the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus feeds everyone!

Now people interpret this miracle in different ways: some literally and supernaturally, while others think it a miracle of the human spirit — that the boy's example in offering up his lunch so inspired the crowd that they pulled out all the food *they* had stashed away, and shared it with each other: one huge potluck.

Whichever explanation you prefer, the message of the story is clear: if you offer to the Lord what you have, he will take it....he will use it....he will multiply it — feeding every hunger, satisfying every need.

Look at all those people out there, Lord! They look so....hungry — and there are so many of them! Look: one of them is all torn up with sadness inside....another's worried about money, how to put bread on the table....still another is sick, off to see the doctor tomorrow....and another couple of people, husband and wife, have just had a fight, a terrible row, and they're not speaking. And look: there are others who aren't even sure they believe in you, not at all certain what they're doing here. They just came....curiosity-seekers who followed the crowd.

Look at that crowd of people, Lord. Just look at them! See the hunger in their eyes. Feel the heartbreak deep within. "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" — Where indeed, Lord? You tell us — it's your question!"

Where *do* the knocked-down, dragged-out, hungry and hurting people of this world ever find help and comfort? As often as not, they are offered help and comfort by followers of Jesus Christ — disciples who truly believe they've been given "gifts that differ according to the grace given," and "to each the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

We have some disciples like that among us. They're the men and women this congregation has elected as our leaders: elders to go about the work of governance; and deacons to share gifts of compassion, witness and service.

When the Andrews of this congregation — members of the Nominating Committee — got in touch with them and asked if they had any gifts to share, each one said, "I don't have

much: just a little bread, here, and some smoked fish. I'm afraid it's not very much. It's not nearly enough."

"That would be true if it were all about us," said the Andrews on the Nominating Committee. "But it's not about us. We're collecting these gifts to bring them to the Lord. Will you trust me with them? Let's bring them to the Lord and see what he can do."

So, here we are today: there are candidates for ordination and installation in our midst. Two are being ordained as elders for the first time. The rest are being installed as deacons *or* elders. Like the boy on the hillside, they're offering their gifts. We honor them for that: and we're waiting to see what the Lord will do with them.

It couldn't have been easy for that kid to give up his picnic lunch that day. It never *is* easy to deploy a spiritual gift for the first time, to pull it from out of that secret place deep within, and allow it see the light of day. There are so many fears:

What if I can't do it?

What if I make a fool of myself?

What if there's someone whose job it is already?

The late Dom Helder Camara was Brazil's "archbishop of the poor" — or so he was called, on account of his compassion toward the slum- and shantytown-dwellers of his vast and weary country. Here's a poem Archbishop Camara wrote, about learning how to share bread with others:

**If you share your bread
in fear,
mistrustfully,
undaringly,
in a trice
your bread
will fail.**

**Try sharing it
without looking ahead,
not thinking of the cost,
unstintingly,
like a son of the Lord
of all the harvests in the world.**

Who's to know what, exactly, that young boy saw, on that Galilean hillside long ago? Did he know who he was dealing with? Did it dawn on him, I wonder, that he was regarding the "Lord of all the harvests in the world?"

How could he possibly have known it? Even the twelve disciples were mightily confused, much of the time, about their master's true nature. Yet maybe, just maybe, with the clear and honest eye of a child, this one looked at Jesus and saw divinity dancing in his eyes. Maybe, in that brief instant of time, he realized that, tucked within the sleeve of his dirty robe, was something the Lord had need of: something *he* could give. And so the boy reached in, and held out his bundle, balanced on the palm of his hand.

His pitiful little cupful of generosity became, then, in Jesus' hands, a gushing waterfall: and afterwards, as John tells it, "they were [all] satisfied."

"Many men," writes the poet, Alexander Pope, "have been capable of doing a wise thing, more a cunning thing, but very few a generous thing." Though he himself was far from being a man, this nameless boy so succeeded in doing "a generous thing" that what he did that day has been honored ever since.

The miracle of it all — the continuing miracle — is that, ever since that day on the hillside, Jesus Christ continues to take the poor shreds of bread and fish we offer, and multiplies them. You and I, my friends, are a gifted people — never doubt that! Most of us possess talents we've barely begun to use.

Never doubt what Christ can accomplish, through your spiritual gifts. The only real offense, when it comes to those gifts, lies in holding back, in hesitating, in failing to believe that what we have to offer has any value. Gifts don't belong in the attic. They're meant to be shared!

Andrew didn't hold back from his searching; the boy with the loaves and the fish did not hold back from his giving. Why should we?

Why should we?

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