

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING:

Blessed with Talent

1 Peter 4:7-11¹

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Have you ever received a gift and you didn't have a clue what it was?

Last Christmas we gave my sister-in-law a USB drive in the form of a writing pen for her computer. It looked like a cool James Bond toy, in that it looked like a basic pen until you unscrewed it and found a 2 GB USB drive. Cris is a graduate student who writes a lot of papers, so we thought she would love this gift. But when she opened it, it was clear that she had no idea what it was. Even after our kids explained it to her and showed her how it worked, she still wasn't sure.

I had received one of these USB pen drives as a gift a while back and someone had to show me how to use it too. And it's also true that God sometimes blesses us with certain gifts but we aren't sure how to use them either. Sometimes we don't even know what they are. But more about gifts later . . .

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There's a story in today's *Washington Post Magazine* about area teen-agers who were polled about several life questions – questions about who their friends are, what their hopes are for the future. One of the questions is this:

*“Do you think there will or will not
be another terrorist attack as big as the one on September 11, 2001?”*

While 57% said that “Yes, we will have an attack,” the youth of today – at least according to this article – are still a hopeful bunch.² Most think they will be successful as adults. Most believe that life is getting better all the time.

Life is like a big present. They don't know exactly what's in there, but they believe it will be good. It's an exciting time, in spite of serious doubts about safety and security.

When this letter was written in the first century³ to the five new churches in Asia,⁴ there was also great excitement in the throes of doubts about safety and security. The

¹ Although this letter is ascribed to Peter, the situations described occurred after Peter's death and much of the writing is that of a person with more education than a poor fisherman from Galilee. Most scholars believe that it was written by an elder in the early church. See 1 Peter 5:1.

² “What Teens Really Think” by Richard Morin, *The Washington Post Magazine*, October 23, 2005, p. 16.

excitement was not the exuberant, joyous kind. In fact, there was little hope that the future on this earth would be anything other than dangerous. And yet . . . there was also a profound faith that in spite of the danger, God would continue to bless the first Christians with precious gifts.

When this First Letter of Peter was written, life had become increasingly treacherous for Christians. The Roman Emperor Nero had accused the them of terrorism – that they had burned Rome, when many believe that Nero himself had set the fires.⁵

Christians were slandered, called “evil-doers” by those in power.⁶ If we read just the next verse that comes after the end of today’s lesson, we can see that life was challenging. There’s talk of “the fiery ordeal” taking place.

This letter could have been written during the reign of Nero (54-68), Domitian (81-96) or even the cruel Trajan (98-117) – all known for their violent attacks on Christians. We don’t know for sure. But it’s clear that at the very least, Christians were harassed and ostracized by their neighbors.

This is why – throughout this letter – Christians are reminded to respond to evil with good, to be disciplined in the way they act and speak so that no one can accuse them of being just like the ugly Gentiles in their villages and towns.

After all – this persecution, this aggravation wouldn’t last forever. “The end of all things” was near. These early Christians still believed that Jesus was coming back soon, that the rapture would quickly be upon them.

But there was no wasting time gathering up the family and heading to the hills to wait for the Second Coming. Instead, the Christians were told to:

*love one another,
to be hospitable to one another,
to serve one another with whatever gift each of them had received.*

They were to speak as if they were speaking the very words of God, to serve with the strength God gave them. It was all about God, for God, because of God. Even in their struggles, they were blessed with some way to serve.

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³ If Peter actually wrote this letter, it could be dated as early as 64 or 65 AD. Most scholars date it later – perhaps as late as about 90.

⁴ The 5 churches were in five provinces of Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. (See 1 Peter 1:1.) All of these congregations were in what is modern day Turkey.

⁵The burning of Rome occurred in 64 AD.

⁶ 1 Peter 2:12.

We are about to enter the season in our culture when giving gifts takes on a life of its own. We will be inundated with gift ideas, gift suggestions, gift card options, and gift-giving opportunities at work, at home, in schools, in the neighborhood.

Some of us will be so specific about the gifts we want – or the gifts others will specify for us to give to them – that the element of surprise will be minimal. When someone specifically asks for a lime green iPod Mini, then there isn't much room for creative shopping – unless we want to go all out and select an iPod Nano. (If you don't know what I'm talking about then just trust that there are some very cool gifts out there that were not available when most of us were young adults.)

In my family, sometimes people share that they need a specific color for a sweater. Or they would love to have a specific game – in fact, a specific edition of a specific game. There is little surprise involved.

In fact when there is a complete surprise, sometimes it's because of disappointment. "But I thought I was going to get the complete *Batman Anthology*, not *Batman Begins!*"

This is among the more disillusioning aspects of gift-giving. Offering a gift becomes less of a surprise than an expectation. The thing is – God almost always presents us with unexpected gifts. It's almost always a surprise.

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If you've traveled to other countries and visited people in their homes, you know that hospitality is a critical part of the culture of many places. When I was a teenager, I spent a summer in Guatemala with a host family, and upon entering their lovely home, I noticed a beautiful carved wooden box sitting on their coffee table. "*Que linda,*" I said.

Immediately the mother in the family handed the box to me and asked me to take it. "I want you to have it," she said. *Quisiera que usted lo tuviera.*

"What? No, I couldn't possibly take this." But she placed it in my hand, clearly thrilled to be giving it to me. There was no trace of "this kid walks into my home and right away wants something!" Instead, her attitude of hospitality was generous and completely real.

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Nowhere is this more true than in the Middle East, in the culture in which First Peter was written. When I traveled to Jordan two years ago, we visited with a Christian family in Amman and had dinner in their lovely home filled with traditional crafts – especially beautiful needlework on pillows and wall hangings. I was admiring a particular pillow on the sofa, but didn't dare pick it up. (I'd learned my lesson in

Guatemala: if you look too closely at something or pick it up, the host will probably give it to you.)

I simply admired the pillow with my eyes and told the hostess what a nice home she had.

But the next day, there was a package at the front desk of the hotel for me. And when I opened the package, inside was the pillow with a note: “I noticed that you liked this pillow and I would like for you to have it in remembrance of our evening together in Amman.”

Imagine for a moment having friends visit from another country. And they come into our homes and admire a rug, a small painting, the wide-screen TV – and we give it to them. Imagine that. But this is a common practice in much of the world.

The Christians in this letter were told that – even if your neighbors are harassing you – show hospitality to them. And do it with the right spirit.

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There is of course another aspect of gift-giving that is perhaps holier, an aspect of stewardship that connects us directly to the Giver – to God. We read in this letter that *each person* has been given a gift. And of course, we are not talking about wooden boxes and embroidered pillows here.

“Each of you” has received a gift, it says. That would include men and women, young and old, healthy and disabled, rich and poor. Each has received at least one gift with which we can serve someone else.

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to unwrap this gift and discover what it is. And sometimes we need another person to tell us what it is. Have you ever had someone explain to you that you have a God-given gift that you didn’t even realize you had? Have you ever said to someone else, “You know, you are really good at _____. Have you ever thought about doing that full time?”

Paul talked about spiritual gifts – the God-given gifts of teaching or healing or working miracles, for example⁷ – but this letter refers to unnamed gifts – perhaps too numerous to name – that bring glory to God and therefore make the world a little bit more like what God intended.

In the past several weeks, the theme of these sermons has been **Blessed to Be A Blessing** and the point of all these sermons is to understand that it’s not enough to acknowledge that we have been blessed: with money, with time, with talent. It’s not enough to sit back in our Lazy Boy recliners in our comfortable homes surrounded by all

⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

our possessions and say, “I’m so blessed” and leave it at that. That’s just the first step in growing spiritually – to acknowledge that God has blessed us.

But if we fail to take the second step – to use those blessings to bless someone else – then we are forever doomed to a childish spirituality. And there are other steps even beyond the first two. Jesus spoke of the spiritual problem of loving only those who love us:

*If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
If you greet only your brothers and sisters,
what more are you doing than others?
But I say to you,
‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . .’⁸*

Maybe you’re a good cook or you write beautiful stories or you have a knack for working on cars. It’s a first step to open that gift and recognize it for what it is. It’s a second step to share it among the people you love. But this letter calls us to share our gifts even with those beyond our own little community.

Some preachers use this passage to stress the importance of pledging your talents for the sake of the church – meaning we must use our God-given gifts within the walls of this particular place – to teach Sunday School right here, to volunteer in the office right here. And I’m the first to say that there are great needs here to bless the church with your talents every day.

But if our gifts don’t reach out beyond the walls of this church, then we are stuck spiritually. We are loving only those who love us. We are serving only those who can serve us.

This letter we call First Peter reminds us that Jesus calls us to use our God-given talents to reach out beyond our little community – in this case, even to those who harass the Christians so that others beyond their enclave of believers might find faith.

We serve not to use our blessings merely to maintain our own little bubble of love and community. We serve so that the community outside these walls will be impacted, to include others who are not yet with us.

On a final note, I’d like to share one more thing about the little carved box I received from my hostess in Guatemala. She insisted that I have it and clearly she was giving it with no reservations.

I kept it in my room throughout that summer. And one day, as I was looking at it closely, my Guatemalan sister pointed out the initials at the bottom of the box. And there was a date carved as well. Those are my grandfather’s initials. And the date is their wedding day. He gave this to his wife the day they got married.

⁸ See Matthew 5: 44-47.

“What?” I said. “Your grandfather gave this to your grandmother on their wedding day? Well, I definitely can’t take it now.”

“Oh, no,” my sister said. “This is for you. My mother wants you to have it. It means so much to her that you love it.”

Consider how God must feel in terms of the gifts we’ve been given. Consider how much it must mean to God to watch us unopen a gift, recognize what it is and then love it and use it. And consider the ultimate gift – God’s Son and all the breathtaking lessons Jesus has passed on to us. Our Father wants us to have these gifts. It means so much that we appreciate them and use them.

Consider today what gifts we have and then consider how we might pass them on to someone else.

Let us pray:

Loving and merciful and generous God: only you can give us the words and the attitude and the demeanor to speak and serve using your words, your strength. Move us to not only open the gifts you’ve given us but also to love them and to share them, that we might change the world to look more like your plans for creation, through Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.