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“The Gifts of God, for the People of God”

A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

Pentecost Sunday (Year C)

June 9, 2019

Deuteronomy 5:1-21 Luke 12:1-12

My husband and I traveled to Charlotte recently

to relish what surely is one of life’s sweetest moments:

the graduation of our grandson from pre-school!

And of course, as doting grandparents, we came bearing gifts!

You can’t mark a special occasion in the family without the giving of gifts:

a gift for the graduate and a gift for his little brother

who doesn’t understand yet that he isn’t graduating, too.

As our five-year-old tore through the dinosaur wrapping paper to reveal his gift –

a LEGO Jr. Jurassic World Raptor Rescue Truck –

we thought he’d be ecstatic, because he loves both LEGOs and dinosaurs.

However, while he wasn’t exactly disappointed, he did qualify his excitement

with the comment that he actually had hoped we would give him

a LEGO City Fire Station. Ahem!

Why is it sometimes so hard to accept a gift for what it is?

Today is Pentecost in the Christian tradition, a celebration
of the giving of the Holy Spirit to the nascent church,
coming 50 days after Easter and its gift of resurrection.

In the Jewish tradition, we would be celebrating Shavu'ot this week, a celebration
of the giving of the Torah to the people of God, coming 50 days after Passover
and its gift of deliverance from death.

Judaism claims that Passover freed the Jewish people physically from bondage,
while the giving of the Torah redeemed them spiritually
from bondage to idolatry and immorality.

Shavu'ot, they say, commemorates *the giving* of the Torah, rather than the
receiving of the Torah.

Jewish sages point out that we are constantly in the process of receiving the Torah,
as we receive it every day for guidance.

But it was given to us as a gift, spoken from the mouth of the Lord to Moses
that first time on Mt. Sinai or Horeb, out of the fire on the mountain.

Thus it is *the giving*, not the receiving, that makes Shavu'ot a holy day.

There is a quote that comes to my mind on this day, by an unknown author,
concerning gifts, and it is this:

“There are two things we should *give* our children:
one is roots, and the other is wings.”

One thing I hope that we can celebrate today, is our rootedness in Judaism
and the solid foundation laid for us

by the God of Abraham, Sarah, Issac, Jacob, Moses, and Ruth
in the gift and guidance of the law – the instruction for a good life

offered through the Torah and the Hebrew Scriptures.

Our choirs illustrated this last week when they sang the line in

Cantique de Jean Racine by Faure, "From slumber waken us,

our weary souls reviving, that we may never forget all thy laws!"

These laws – these instructions – are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God!

But there is more. God did not stop there in being overwhelmingly generous.

Not only has God rooted us and grounded us in the law,

but God also has given us wings to fly with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel passage today is not found in our Revised Common Lectionary,

perhaps because some of the things that Jesus says here fall hard on the ear

and don't sound like the "nice" Jesus we are accustomed to hearing.

First of all, Jesus has to deal with the crowds who are surging in the thousands,

perhaps in the tens of thousands, to get a glimpse of him or to

catch a word or two of what he has to say.

Even with their good intent, they are shoving, elbowing, and trampling one another,

endangering the safety of Jesus and his closest disciples.

This is the perfect setup for Jesus to address the risk of being a disciple

and the cost of following him, with threat likely to come

from both well-intended supporters and adversaries.

Some, like the swarming crowd, may become over-zealous, competitive,

jealous, and envious of other's proximity to Jesus,

elbowing to enhance their position in the newfound faith.

Others – like the Pharisees – may be prone to hypocrisy, Jesus says:

saying one thing to your face in the light of day;

yet whispering something else behind closed doors in the dark of night.

How, then, are disciples to prepare themselves for confrontation,

for public defamation, for violent resistance, and for perhaps even death?

As Christianity evolves it will become, historically,

“the most persecuted world religion,” according to the Pew Research Center.¹

We quickly forget that on Easter Sunday of this year multiple bombings of churches

in Sri Lanka killed more than 250 Christians attending worship

and wounded many more with ISIS claiming responsibility for those brutal attacks.

Jesus knows that the way will be difficult for his little flock,

that his grace will not be cheap, but costly.

So, Jesus seeks to comfort his present and future followers who fear speaking out

about their faith because it might result in push-back, persecution, or death.

He calls them his friends, you will notice.

He says to them, “Fear not, friends, those who might inflict physical harm on you:

those who might chase you, spit in your face, fire-hose you,

bomb your places of worship, arrest you, beat you,

hang your body from a lynching tree, assassinate you.

Fear not, friends, these people,” he says.

“Fear only God, the One who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven and hell;

the One who regards the life of even a tiny weightless sparrow as significant;

¹*Christian Century*, May 22, 2019, p.9.

the One who numbers and counts every hair on your head as precious. “
His friends, his followers, should seek comfort and consolation in *this* God, Jesus says,
who takes full account of their wholeness, well-being, and shalom
in this life and the next.

And then he reminds believers of that other gift which we have been given:
the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We already have the gift of the law as our moral compass.

Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets,
but to fulfill them.²

But friends of Jesus have been given the additional gift of the Holy Spirit,
which will come to us and teach us at every hour what we ought to say
when we become fearful or tongue-tied in the face of opposition.

The Holy Spirit will loose our lips and gift us with the right words of
understanding and wisdom, just as she did on the day of Pentecost to
those tousled and inspired by the Spirit’s mighty wind and fiery tongue.

The gift of the Spirit comes to Jesus’ followers as comforter, intercessor,
counselor, regenerator, empowerment, teacher, inspirer, unifier, protector,
advocate, and guarantor of God’s promises yet to come.

Why should we feel discouraged, or why should our hearts be troubled,
when the God who shelters us under her Spirit-wing like a mother hen
is not someone you want to mess with?

² Matt. 5:17.

African American slave narratives include a folk tale called "The People Could Fly."

It talks about a time back in Africa when the African people could fly,

rising up like blackbirds with their wings shining against the blue sky.

However, when they were captured and carried into slavery, they shed their wings

on the long boats to America and fell into lives

of misery, sickness, hardship, and cruel oppression.

But, according to legend, one old man named Toby remembered about the flying.

He would not let his people forget *the mystic help that transcends adversity*.

So when his people would stumble in the fields

or when they were whipped and beaten, he would speak

the ancient words of flight to them, "Kum yali, kububa tabe."

And they would rise up, light as a feather, to fly like an eagle,

black wings against the blue sky.³

That is the power of the Holy Spirit, friends, which inspired people like Harriet Tubman

to guide people from slavery to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

Tubman's people called her "Moses", because they believed that African Americans

were a specially chosen people, too, with their own Exodus from oppression."⁴

That is God's gift of roots and wings in action!

That is God's gift to help believers fly *beyond* things like

failure, shame, addiction, illness, bullying, abuse, and slavery.

It is also God's power to fly with courage *towards and into* things of this world,

like climate change, injustice, incarceration, gun violence, health care,

and education reform

³ Wheel Council, Inc., "The People Could Fly." <http://www.wheelcouncil.org/stories/the-people-could-fly/>.

⁴ Gerson, Michael. "Harriet Tubman still makes her pursuers look like fools." *The Herald Sun*, May 29, 2019.

and raise those up towards freedom and wholeness as well.

We've been given the power, friends.

God has gifted us with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus does make a most confusing statement in this Lucan narrative,

one that seems totally out of character from the Jesus we usually know.

He says to his friends, "Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man,

will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit

will not be forgiven."⁵

This seems harsh, doesn't it, that there might be a sin for which we are not forgiven?

But what I think Jesus is trying to say is this:

all sins ARE forgivable, except the refusal of God's gift of the Holy Spirit!

Don't tear into this brightly-wrapped gift from God, and say:

gee, I don't' really need this;

you know, I think I can make it on my own, thank you;

smart people don't need this primitive gobbety-gook;

I'll just take the cash value, please, rather than the gift;

or, I'd really rather have the Lego City Fire Station.

Although he said just that, even our grandson knew better than to refuse the gift!

The Holy Spirit is given freely from our generous and gracious God

to bless and enrich us, to protect us and creation from all ills.

Says one theologian, "The Spirit arrives incognito,

⁵ Luke 12:10

bringing the indwelling love of God.

Those who do not refuse it become lovers of the only God there is,

because the only God there is has loved them (us) first."⁶

To refuse this gift would be like the rocky soil or thorny soil refusing the seed

which the farmer freely scattered.⁷

To refuse this gift would be to walk, when we, the people, can fly!

On this Pentecost Sunday, I close with a poem by Mary Oliver entitled

"The Gift."

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.

Earth and heaven both are still watching

though time is draining from the clock

and your walk, that was confident and quick

has become slow.

So, be slow if you must, but let

the heart still play its true part.

Love still as once you loved, deeply

and without patience. Let God and the world

know you are grateful that the gift has been given.⁸

In the name of God, the Parent, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Hefling, Charles, as quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor. *Holy Envy*, p. 187.

⁷ Mark 4:1-9.

⁸ Oliver, Mary. "The Gift" in *Felicity*, 2015.

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