

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 31, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

How to make miracles happen!

Sacred text: First, make me a small cake. I Kings 17:13

It is the season of Lent and traditionally the church has taught that we need to give up something for Lent. Some of the largest churches in Europe were built from the Season of Lent. The tower of the great cathedral in Rouen was called the butter tower because people who did not want to give up butter for Lent had to pay money to the cathedral to build the tower. Seems to me that they ate a lot of butter then!

But why give up something for Lent? Because it is to teach us the lesson that the gift must not stop with us. It must move.

The preacher just finished his sermon for the day and proceeded toward the back of the church for his usual greetings and handshaking as the congregation left the church. He came upon the seven-year-old son of one of the Deacons of the church.

"Good morning, Jonathan," the preacher said as he reached out to shake Jonathan's hand.

As he was doing this, he felt something in the palm of Jonathan's hand. "What's this?" the preacher asked.

I have a gift for you," said Jonathan with a big smile on his face, handing him a quarter, It's for you!"

"I don't want to take your money, Jonathan," the preacher answered.

"I want you to have it," said Jonathan. After a short pause Jonathan continued, "and I want to help you. My daddy says of all the preachers we have ever had, you are the poorest."

One Thanksgiving, in my former church in Stratford, we had an idea that we should have the children in the service build a Horn of Plenty on the altar. All went well with the children placing fruits into the Horn of Plenty until we came to one small boy of only three years of age. When he got up to me, I saw how hard this was for him! His little fingers very slowly released themselves from around the pear he was holding. Slowly, very slowly, he gave me the pear for the horn of plenty. I think he wanted that pear for himself. I very much admired his struggle. I don't think at the age of three it is easy to give away anything. Experts tell us that that is the age when children start to say, "That is mine and you can't have it!" Of course, some parent's children are precocious, and they start that stuff much earlier!

So, what I wonder today is this. Does it ever really get any easier to give things away?

In the Hebrew Scripture today, we read of the woman who was starving and down to her last two sticks of fuel, last bit of flour and oil. Incredibly Elijah asks her to bake **him** a cake *first* and then make something for her son and herself.

I'm wondering if we were down to our last two sticks and our very last carefully conserved meal, how receptive would we be to someone who asked to be looked after first?

In the Christian Scripture we read the story of the rich young ruler, who had lived a good life all his life. Jesus, sensing that this man's life was not whole, immediately puts his finger on the problem. He says to him "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and then you will have riches in Heaven and come and follow me." And when the young man hears this, he goes away with a heavy heart; for he was a man of great wealth.

Instead of a poor person being asked for all that they had, it's a rich person being asked for all that they had. But which is harder?

In relative terms to us, if we stood in history beside the man of great wealth, we might look pretty affluent with our cars, TV sets computers, I phones and I pads, our house, our second property, our stocks and bonds. But think about it just for a moment. Would we be willing to give it all up and give it to the poor? Surely we would have said "You are kidding! Right? No?" And we would turn away for we have great possessions too!

Scott Peck, author of The Road Less Traveled, says that **we have to be willing to give up the things we possess in order to grow spiritually. That is hard!**

But LIFE is about giving up isn't it?

First of all, we have to give up being children who possess their parents attention all the time. As teens we have to give up the idea that it is all about me. Then we have to make career choices. Two roads open up before us that diverge. Which shall we take? We can't do both. We marry or not. If we marry, we generally give up other marital choices and hopefully commit to one person. Then we make a choice to have children or not. Either way we have to give things up. As our children grow, we have to give up our authority over them and that can be a painful process.

When success comes our way, one day we will have to give up that dream job that we love, on which we have placed our identity. We become bank president, shop steward, a local politician or one at the national level and even if we move into total denial, we still have to give it up. The day comes when we have to give up physical agility. We lose our sexual attractiveness and attractive young men and women pass by us with never a glance, and we say "I used to turn heads! Whatever happened?"

One day comes that we find ourselves almost if not completely dependent upon others who wait on us in extended care, in a retirement home. Ultimately, we have to give life itself up. Have you ever asked yourself why all this giving up?

There is I think an answer to that question, and it is this: *At the most basic level of all, life is a gift to us.* As far as I know we didn't ask to come to this planet. We find ourselves alive, and in this reality, not of our own volition. We are not our own idea. We don't create ourselves despite what some self-made people think. Life came to us as a gift WHICH WE DO NOT FULLY CONTROL and eventually we have to give this physical gift back. We are like a book on loan in the library of life and we have a due date. We all have to die.

One year, a husband who was harried by his mother in law on a regular basis decided to buy her a cemetery plot as a Christmas gift.

The next year, he didn't buy her a gift.

When the mother in law asked him why, he replied, "Well, the gift I bought you last year, you still haven't used."

Let's look hard at the facts of this life that we are given. We can never really own anything or anyone. A lot of trouble comes from trying to do that. Truth is we can't own property. We get to look after it for awhile. We can control the *use of it* for awhile. **And how we do that determines whether our spirits grow more beautiful or not.**

Some people think that they own their spouse. I had one man who thought when he got married that his wife belonged to him. When she slept with another man, he got angry saying she is **my** wife by which he meant that she was his property. He said, "I will kill that man." Owning another person simply does not work. The days of slavery are over. In our society marriage depends upon the free ongoing decision to love. Ownership in marriage is dysfunctional and destructive. Don't go there! Instead let's remember the gift, that our loved ones commit themselves to us freely, every day!

Lewis Hyde in his book The Gift says that in great literature the person who tries to hold onto the gift, whatever it is, usually dies; unless they come to understanding first. Dicken's Scrooge clutches the gift as Marley did, and as he clutches, he shrivels up inside. Only when he understands that the gift must not stop with him, does Scrooge come to joy.

Think of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. *Keeping the ring of power slowly destroys the bearer of the Ring*. Hyde says that the passing along of a blessing is essential to the preservation of its blessed quality. In short, the gift must move and not get stuck with us.

Notice in the story of the widow what happens when she gives her last meal away. Power is released! A miracle happens!

Suddenly it is not just a widow and her son. Now there are **three** working on this problem and one of them understands what I am teaching today; That all of life is a gift that can be maintained only at the will of the Divine Giver, *and to understand that, is the beginning of our freedom*. The old story teaches us that the gift moves in ever widening circles like throwing a rock into a pond. Why? Because underlying all reality is a law of the universe. This law of the universe says that **the gift must move**.

Think of money. When money stops circulating everything slows and can even stop. Remember the movie Pay it Forward? The gift must move!

I have often wondered which is harder; to give away your last nickel or to give away immense riches? Perhaps it is easier to be neither rich nor poor, because if we give, it doesn't kill us and in Tolkien's terms the fascination and hold of the ring of power and wealth is not yet upon us...

Was the Jesus of history's demand on the rich young ruler unreasonable? Many commentators think that this man could have become one of the 12 disciples. Perhaps another apostle Paul, a man whose words have changed history, contributed to wisdom, a man who passed the gift on. But instead this young rich man disappears from the pages of history completely. Who knows what he might have become *if he had learned the lesson that the gift must move?*

In a free enterprise society, we have difficulty sharing. For instance, we don't redistribute wealth and give it to the poor. Robin Hood is not our hero. We don't like to tax the rich. Rags to riches is our hero. We call it The Middle class upwardly mobile dream. We solve the problem of wealth accumulation by growing the economic pie. That way we don't have to give up our wealth for we believe that the pie can always expand. But is this true?

Ever since the publishing of Limits to Growth in 1973 the thesis that we can grow the pie forever has been questioned. The limits are real. Ask those who fish the seas, drill for oil and Study climate change or population growth. Third world debt has tripled from what it was in the 1980s. One day the concentration of wealth will have to be tackled. Why? Because the gift must move. It's a law of the universe. Do the richest 1% understand this? I don't think so...

On the personal level what happens when we move the gift along? *There will be an immediate release of power.* Moving it makes us happy, clutching it makes us sad, *and adds to the misery of the world.*

So why don't we move the gift? It's the fear of losing something isn't it? We are like that little boy with the pear. He is not sure that there are more pears. And let me reverse Christian scripture for a moment *Perfect fear casts out love.* It shrivels up our hearts and there is no power, no freedom and eventually, no happiness as we clutch. Fear is never a matter of logic, for we all know, as the expression goes about wealth, that "We can't take it with us!"

Here's the truth. We are not our own source. God is source. And faith in the Giver of life is demonstrated best by the faith to give freely, to love people without strings attached and then like Scrooge to come at the last to joy. On Christmas morning Scrooge is a changed man. He is bubbling over with life and vitality and he is having fun sending the biggest Goose in the shop to Bob Cratchit!

By the way, I do not see Scrooge as any less of an investor. When Warren Buffet gives a billion to Bill Gates to manage for charity, he doesn't stop being Warren Buffet. I think that both Scrooge and Buffet kept and keep their lively interest in the stock exchange. *Note however that the purpose changes.* Instead of becoming holding tanks they become channels of abundance *that God can use.*

The less we clutch, the more passes through our hands, the better we all are.

But to discover this truth it is necessary to understand fully the text with which we began; **First**, make me a small cake! In the worst situation you can think of, **GIVE anyway!**

Let's put the priority of this text to work in the laboratory of our own lives. Then first hand we will come to understand the law of the gift, that it must move in order for abundance to happen. Let me close with a true story.

A single mother was laid off and could not make her house payments. The bank foreclosed and her home was put up for auction. At the auction this single mom lost emotional control and began to weep at losing her home where she had had such wonderful memories. A woman noticed her weeping and came up to ask what was wrong. She explained to this woman that she had lost her job and now her home was about to be sold.

The stranger asked which home it was on the list and the single mom pointed to the number.

The auction progressed and the stranger bid on the home. She had competition but she pressed on, raising her offer time after time. She finally bought the home and then found the single mom in the crowd.

She said; 'I came here to buy a house for my son but now I realize that God sent me here to buy this house for you.' She gave the ownership back to this woman who only moments before had been heartbroken.

As we partner with God and move the gift, we too can make miracles happen!

But first we need to prime the pump with faith!

Make me a small cake, first.