

14 December, 2008  
Fr. Richard L. Green

I greet you on what the English called “Stir-Up Sunday.” It refers to the first words in the Collect for today, “Stir up your power, O Lord”. It was also traditionally the day the English ladies would stir up the batter for their English Christmas puddings. Then, the puddings would rest in themselves for weeks ahead of Christmas. So there’s trivia for you.

Last Sunday I talked about the first step in the spiritual journey. The baptism of John the Baptizer was the first step of cleansing one’s self of the guilt, the sin, the baggage and the brokenness of life. So we would then be prepared, in receiving that forgiveness, to move onto the next step. Before anything else could start we need to cleanse ourselves of all of that. It doesn’t mean that we’re never going to make another mistake. But that we need to be cleansed of that sinfulness and the guilt that goes with it before we can move on.

Today I want to talk about the next step. And if the first step is focused on John, the Baptizer, then the second step focuses on Jesus. And this part of the journey seems to focus on what it is that we receive, on what we are given.

So think about the stories we have about Jesus, about the teaching he did. Often they focus on him giving to us: the feeding of the five thousand; the whole image of giving; Jesus giving healing; Jesus giving wholeness; Jesus giving forgiveness. He said Himself, ‘I come not to be served, but to serve.’ Giving.

So in this second stage, having been prepared to be given to; we need to receive. It is not easy for many of us to acknowledge this. A relationship with Christ is one in which we receive. There’s more to it than that, and we’ll talk about that next week. But at this stage in the journey, there’s all of this receiving that we’re supposed to do. And there’s more to it than just, as in that Taj Mahal song about “a handful of gimme’ and a mouthful of much obliged,” we need to be given to. In many cases, we are empty shells. We are a mess. We need to be cared for. We need to be put back together again. We need to have our lives back.

If you think about the miracles of Jesus, the majority of them have to do with healing and wholeness and giving life backn as in the case of Lazarus. That’s such a metaphor for us, receiving our lives back again, having been taken away by, you name it: addiction, disease, insanity, whatever it might be. Sin?

And so to be given to, to be mothered, to be taken care of, to receive, to be put back together, to be given new life, to be given community, to be given that forgiveness. To have those relationships which are possible in a faith community, relationships with one another, relationships with the Divine. All of that is just bounteously heaped upon us.

It makes the gift-giving that we receive; the gifts that we receive at Christmas take on a new meaning symbolically - even if it's the silliest, most useless thing. You know, that old adage that "it's the thought that counts?" It's the connection here that really counts.

All of those things are part of this stage in the spiritual journey. And anything we do beyond that, if we get ahead of ourselves in this journey, we're going to be ill-prepared for it. So it's important for us to be able to receive.

Now, clearly, these stages I'm talking about in this journey are not very conveniently all orderly and nicely put together for us. There are all kinds of slop-over and flip-backs and do-overs and, you know, it's not just a smooth passage. But we need all of these stages as we progress along this path and this all becomes part of it because we do have to go back and do some clean-up especially in the forgiveness part of it. And then come ahead and get some of this receiving and care so that we can really be prepared to move into later stages.

So much of what we receive, if we look in the Epistle today, has to do with our sanctification. The things that we receive, the healing, the wholeness, the forgiveness, have to do with making us more whole and the sanctification process.

Paul, in writing to the church in Thessalonica, is very clear about that. This is probably the oldest Christian writing that we have. It's Paul's First Epistle. It is often confusing because the placement of the Gospels in the Bible before the Epistles. We think often times that the Gospels were written first, and then the Epistles, but it's the other way around.

In Thessalonica there had been all this talk about Jesus coming back and time has passed and he had not come back. They were starting to get restless and anxious, fearful and impatient. And they were complaining to Paul. And Paul says, "Okay, okay. I know what we've been saying and maybe we were a little premature. But look: In the meantime - it's still going to be anytime now - but in the meantime, here's what you can do."

And what does he say? First: Rejoice Always. Okay, that sounds like a nice church-y thing. Pray Without Ceasing. You ever tried that? Pray Without Ceasing. It doesn't say, for a minute and a half or even twenty minutes or even a day. It says pray without ceasing. Forever - or until Jesus comes.

Give Thanks in All Circumstances. Give thanks in *all* circumstances. Huh. Well that sounds like, at best, Pollyanna. At worst, insanity.

So what's going on here? Well, I think this is part of the gift. This is part of that giving because Paul recognizes that one of the gifts that we receive in this relationship with Christ is this deepening of heart and of mind and expansion of consciousness that comes in being able to find out how in the world one rejoices always and gives thanks in all circumstances. And some of it may have to do with the praying without ceasing.

For us to truly be able to rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances, it's going to stretch us because in our minds, we will judge a circumstance to be good, bad or maybe just indifferent. But we do not always have the depth or the breadth of vision to make that discernment. Things that happen, on the surface, can seem like the worst possible thing or the best imaginable thing and can turn out to be just the opposite.

For everybody in this room who has been divorced, you know what I'm talking about. What seemed to be the best possible thing can end up being the most painful thing imaginable. Just the opposite, too. In my own case, I went through a divorce when I lived in Seattle. And at the time, it felt like a Civil War amputation. You know, where they say, 'Here, take a shot of this and then we'll put a stick between your teeth as we saw off a body part.' Well, that is the way it felt.

In the process, though, I realized that I had to pay attention to what was going on. I had to really experience it. Because otherwise, I feared I might end up doing it again. If I do not learn this time, am I going to have to do it again to learn what needs to be learned? So what seemed at the time to be the most painful imaginable thing – it was the second time it happened. I knew that there was something I was not getting about this whole process. [laughter] That was Kathleen, that little chortle...

So, what happened was it was like a slap in the face, a bucket of ice water. There was an awakening in my spiritual life which took place. It required me to go back to basics and start doing a lot of personal reflection to understand what was going on with me and my relationships with women, my relationship with my self, and in my relationship with God. To the point that eventually I end up married to Kathleen with my spiritual life awakened and engaged in ways that I had never imagined.

So what seemed like the worst imaginable thing ends up being just what the doctor ordered. Being exactly what needed to take place. And so I was able, even in the midst of the pain, to realize, you know this is good. It hurts, but this is really good. This is important. This is life-changing.

I think also of the times – and I am sure I have mentioned this before because I find it to be a profound statement about life – the first time a hospice patient said to me that 'cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me' I thought the person was delusional. But then I heard it again and again. Several times I have heard people within days or weeks of their death say they have been more alive in their dying than they had been in their previous years of life. They say their consciousness, that sense of being present and awake to their relationship to themselves and to God was so far beyond any of their experience in their life before, that they viewed the cancer as the best thing that ever happened to them.

Because it was an awakening. And with all the pain and all of the humiliation and all of the things that go along with it, they were alive and awake for the first time in their lives. It's one of those things that you sure would not ask for, but what a gift. What a gift.

So in this stage of the journey what we are given is not always what we would expect. But then, that is probably what Jesus thought as he was dragging the crossbeam of his cross up Calvary. Wow, I didn't bargain on this. But, hey, look at the result.

This is not a Hallmark card sort of a path we're on here. It's not always pretty. It's certainly not pain-free. If it is pain-free, then we're way off the path. But the payoffs in life can be beyond our imagination.

It's frightening at times to be sufficiently open to receiving those kinds of gifts. And yet, those are the big ones. Those are so far beyond that shiny red bicycle at Christmas but they are the *big* gifts. And what they do, primarily, is to prepare us for the next stage of the journey that the Holy Spirit brings us. And that you'll hear about next time...

Amen.