

Good Gifts

June is the month in which we celebrate Father's Day and so it seemed appropriate to celebrate in this month's sermon series, some key attributes of our Heavenly Father. Last week, we re-visited a well-known story from the Bible, often referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, but also known as the parable of the Forgiving Father. It's a powerful story told by Jesus, how the Father longs to give His complete forgiveness. This week, we consider the Caring Father, who provides "Good Gifts" to his children. Again, the story is told by Jesus and it is interesting and even enlightening, in that the story has a surprise ending for the listeners, the disciples, and for us today as well.

The story is recorded in 11th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It reads "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13)

The story is told in the context of Jesus' teaching on prayer, which began at the request of the disciples. Jesus first taught them the model prayer, what has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. Then he tells them a parable about a man who knocks at his friend's door at midnight for bread to feed a late-night traveler. The friend's entire family is asleep and the door is bolted, but because of the man's persistence, he gets up and gives him the bread. We understand this to mean that in matters of serving Him, the Father invites us to be persistent and bold as we pray for our needs. It is at this point that the text for today begins.

The beginning verses "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11:9-10) are often quoted and many of you committed these to memory at an early age. The words invite us into the arms of a Caring Father, who listens to us and stands ready to provide our every need. Notice that I used the word "need". Sometimes when my daughter Molly asks me for something, I'll ask her if this is something she needs or something she wants. There is a difference. She usually responds with "Not now Dad".

The Caring Father in this text desires a relationship with His child, to be consulted in matters of life and offer His guidance and blessing on the decisions we make. God invites our participation through prayer as he fills our life with "good gifts" The Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah spoke for God when he said "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and will bring you back from captivity" (Jeremiah 29:11-14). As counselors in school invite a students input on interests, goals, abilities and dreams in helping them assess and determine the path for continuing education, so God invites us to share our thoughts and desires with Him.

A seven year old boy, while saying evening prayers with his father, offered this impromptu petition: "Dear God, please take care of my mommy and daddy, and my little sister. Oh, and take care of Yourself to, God. If anything happens to You, we'll all be in a big mess."

God has a personal interest in our lives but allows us to make choices, either good or bad. Paul in his sermon to the men of Athens said this about God. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives

all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:24-28a). God has the final goal in mind for us and that is to take us to heaven but he allows us to “move and have our being” or way in life, but is close by to keep us from getting hurt, like a father watches a child learning to walk.

A personal example, some of you know that I recently received a 30 year service award for work, but few of you know that 25 years ago I made a decision to end my career with the USDA. Terry and I had been recently married and we made the decision to resign our positions, buy a sawmill, and operate a small business on my parent’s farm in Wisconsin. This doesn’t seem like an ungodly or sinful decision right? We continued to work at our present jobs and operate the sawmill part time. We continued to make plans to move, sell the home we owned, but hadn’t yet put in our notice at work. It seemed God was blessing our decision because our house sold at an unbelievable profit and we had money to work with. Things were going along pretty well until I began to experience considerable low-back pain, more severe than what I had a few years earlier. Not a good thing when you’re in the sawmill business with all its heavy lifting. Some time after, we received an IRS notice of audit. They had some questions concerning our business deductions. When it was all said and done, we were faced with a \$3,000 bill for back taxes and interest. We had borrowed and invested everything we had into the business and didn’t have the cash to pay the IRS. God had finally gotten our full attention that this wasn’t His plan for us. In hindsight, we can see that it never was. It was our plan, not his. Had we bothered to pray, ask, seek, knock, and listen, we would have known that. God used this time to teach us and grow in faith. We would not have prospered there, maybe faced permanent injury and only God knows what else. You can probably guess the rest of the story, we continued to work, sell off equipment and pay back our debt and next time my career changed, we followed Him, to Indiana, a place where He planned to prosper us, not merely a physical prosperity, but more importantly a spiritual prosperity.

This personal experience transitions into the next part of our text where Jesus is having this discussion with His disciples about a father’s “good gifts”. I’d like you to hear His words again, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” This might be a good time to mention, that I am sensitive to those who for whatever reason, recall an earthly father much different than this or maybe even have no recollection at all. This was not God’s plan for your life, but was rather the consequences of living in a broken and sinful world. But never doubt His love for you and His ability to take something broken, such as a broken relationship and restore it. That’s what God does best, He proved it by sending His Son Jesus to restore man’s broken relationship with God.

Jesus’ comparison of fish for snake, egg for scorpion, that is food for danger is interesting in that it tells us something about most fathers, but especially about our Heavenly Father. It tells us that he is not going to toy with us like a cat and a toy on a string. He’s not going to play games with us and try and trip us up so we get hurt. And if we ask for something we really need, something as basic food, clothing and shelter, He will certainly provide it. Isn’t that the way we treat our children. God would not stand idly by and watch Terry and I go off and end a career that He had provided and planned for, that would provide opportunity for us to grow up in faith and be geographically placed to minister and influence lives in the Westfield area.

Now whether God intervened on our behalf by directly causing the events to happen, changing our decision, or whether He withheld His blessing, or whether He removed His protection and allowed for the natural course of events to take place, I don't know the answer. I know He is All-Powerful and is able to do all things and in the end the results were the same. That is the important thing.

At this point you may be asking the age-old question. "Why do bad things happen to "good" people. Why did I develop chronic back pain? Why did my friend and co-worker, Don get lung and brain cancer, as well as many of the people we regularly pray for here at Lord of Life. Why was my great-nephew born with glaucoma and whose future sight is constantly in question? Why did my mom get Alzheimer's disease? Why did Todd Hoffman's dad Stephen, suddenly die and leave Todd's mom Jackie a widow at such an early age? The world would look at these events and say "Boy that really stinks", or "What bad luck", or even "They must have done something wrong for God to punish them like that!" The Bible tells us that the Old Testament Prophet Job was "blameless and upright" in God's sight. Yet Job and his friends struggled with this question. God had allowed Job to be tested by the devil and was stripped of everything in life, the death of his family, loss and destruction of all his possessions, and even his health, enduring pain from boils all over his body. His friends thought they knew the source of his suffering. The problem they contended was his sin. God punishes sinners, therefore if Job were suffering, he was the victim of his own sin.

I think to understand the Father's "good gifts" and the answer to this question, it would be helpful to understand the insight into Scripture given to Martin Luther, in what he called the "Theology of Glory versus the "Theology of the Cross". I share this explanation by way of our Synod's website. "Luther understood that God reveals himself most clearly, graciously, and gloriously not through obvious outward blessings or spiritual experiences or the wisdom of human reason, which he called the "Theology of Glory", but rather by the hiddenness and lowliness of the cross and sufferings, first and foremost, through the cross of Jesus Christ, and then also through our identification with Christ's cross through faith and through our sharing in his sufferings as cross-bearers for Him." Luther cited 1 Corinthians 1:18 which reads "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

To unpack this further, "Theologians of Glory" would reason that "if everything is going well in my life, I have plenty and no suffering, then I must be doing o.k." God and me are like this (crossed fingers), pretty close. It's that Prayer of Jabez philosophy that's out there in the bookstores. That's where Terry and I were when everything was going well with the sawmill business. "Theologians of Glory" would reason like Job's friends, if you're suffering and in need, you must have done something bad and God's going to get you for it. On the other hand, "Theologians of the Cross" would reason as Paul did, when he wrote "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:2b-5) Suffering is an essential part our transformation into the person God wants us to be, as he prepares us for a home in heaven. To paraphrase Paul, it seems foolish to the world, but to us it is God's power at work in our lives.

"Theologians of the Cross" reason as my niece Amy and her husband Jose' have done, parents of Eli, the child I mentioned earlier born with glaucoma. Their life verse has become John 9:1-3, it's included on all their emails. It reads "As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work

of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:1-3) God has great plans for Eli and it will be awesome to witness.

To get back to the question of why these things happen, the things in life that send us reeling, causing us to ask “God where are you in all of this?”, “Theologians of the Cross” look first to the cross of Calvary, where Jesus suffered and died. It is true. God does punish sin. But by Jesus’ suffering, God was saving the world by punishing His own Son Jesus in our place. He was the only one who could survive God’s wrath. That’s the plain and simple truth. Because of Jesus, there’s no need for God to be out to get anyone. God is there for us. He always has been, preserving our life even in the midst of our suffering. Job understood that long before Martin Luther penned these phrases. By faith Job saw the cross over 1,000 years in the future when he spoke these words “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes. I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27)

That brings us to the final point of the text, the surprise ending I spoke of in the beginning. I’d like you to hear again the conclusion of our text. Jesus said “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” At this point in time, the disciples were in the “Theologians of Glory” camp. They were close to the “Messiah”, the miracle guy. Maybe you can imagine their eyes lighting up as Jesus speaks, thinking something like the New Testament version of a “Christmas List!” Let’s see, I need this, this, this, and this. When Jesus announced His “good gift” of the Holy Spirit, you may also be able to imagine the disappointment, bewilderment, and surprise on their faces. This is not at all what they expected and may have even thought “Why do we need that?” We may even ask the same question ourselves. Friends, the Holy Spirit is more than a “good gift”, it is a “most excellent gift”.

Jesus said this about the gift of the Holy Spirit, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor (Holy Spirit) to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:16-19)

Think about it, this is God’s Spirit actually living in us. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith and gives us the ability to believe in Jesus. The Bible says He is a deposit guaranteeing our eternal life. He continually guides us to Jesus and the cross. He helps us to understand God’s word. He moves us to repent of our sin and seek forgiveness. He transforms our mind, body, and soul so we desire to live like God wants us to. He enables us to do “good works” of service, things that please God. And in our thoughts and prayers, He pleads with God on our behalf, He does so even as the Bible says “with groans that words cannot express” as in the case of my 90 year old mother in late stages of Alzheimer’s disease. Now that is a “most excellent gift” from the Father.