



Perhaps the Craziest, Most Surprising, Most Beautiful Gift of All

TEXT
Acts 2:1-13

November 15, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

God is generous. Somewhere, deep in the heart of God, there was a desire that there be life — and so God said let there be, and it was good. And all that we know began because God was generous. But God’s generosity does not stop there.

God spoke again and again and again — first a word of calling to Abraham; then a word of command through Moses; then a word placed in the mouths of the prophets of old, all to show us how to find our way in a complex world — a world that is both beautiful and broken.

But this was not enough because God’s word becomes flesh and dwells among us. And the generosity of God continues. In the craziest, most surprising, perhaps most beautiful gift of all, God gives the world the church.

The church did not have to be. But the Spirit of God shows up and shapes frightened disciples, who were anything but sure about their future; and the Spirit of God gives them calling and hope and purpose and help. But more than anything else, the Spirit of God gives them each other. They become a community that is shaped by the life of Christ.

If someone asked you, “What is the church?” what would you say? How would you describe the church?

The apostle Paul said the church was so shaped by the life of Christ that it was right to call the church “the body of Christ.” In our generation, many have wondered if there is anything of Christ that still shows up in the church. It is common today for critics to claim that the church is just full of hypocrites — which is obviously not true. We have plenty of room for more.

The Presbyterian Church, in hopeful language, describes the church as striving, as endeavoring to be an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

I don’t know how you might describe the church, but one thing seems true to me. The church is one more example of God’s generosity.

One thing the Pentecost narrative makes clear is that the church is not our idea. The church was not the work of a leadership task force that went on retreat and returned with a PowerPoint presentation and said, “We think the world needs the church.” Oh no. The church was God’s idea.

And some may think it was a crazy idea. No doubt there

have been times when maybe even God wondered about the wisdom of this idea. It may be crazy. It is certainly surprising. But at times, it is also the most beautiful of gifts.

That doesn’t change the fact that many wonder if there are any holy fingerprints on the church. More and more folks today have nothing to do with the church. More and more folks find the church to be irrelevant. The fastest growing group in the country is folks who claim to have no religious affiliation. You probably have folks in your own family who wonder why you would spend a perfectly good autumn morning in church.

But more than that, there are folks who find church not simply to be a waste of time, but even more so, they find church to be mean and judgmental and paying attention to all the wrong things.

We must admit that while it is not the whole story, the reason they see the church that way is because there is some truth to what they see. At times the church has been mean. We have been judgmental. We have often paid attention to unimportant matters, while we have chosen to ignore the matters that are most important. To speak of the gift

of the church, we must also be honest about the church.

If I understand the text, God has given the world the church because God believes the church matters. How about you? You are here. There are a million other places you could be right now; there are probably more than a few places you feel like you ought to be. But at least for this moment, you are here. Have you thought about how the church matters in your life?

Last weekend I was away from you. The Riverside Church in Jacksonville, Florida, invited me to return and spend a Sunday with them. Riverside is the collection of saints I served for eight years prior to coming to take this journey with you.

It's been almost 12 years since I was there. A lot can happen in 12 years. It was so gratifying to see how strong their ministry was. They are doing great. But it was shocking too. There are some folks there whom I love deeply who have become pretty sick — and I did not know it. It was hard to see that.

Most shocking were the kids who were in the youth group. Twelve years ago, they were getting their driver's licenses and spending lock-ins in the church, and last Sunday, some of them introduced me to their babies. OK, they are in their late 20s now, but I still think of them as teenagers. I almost asked, "Do your parents know about this?"

That trip reminded me of something about the church. I am not their pastor anymore, but they would welcome me as one of the family. They would say

that Carol and I could always belong there because belonging to the church is not something that dies.

There is a connection in church that I do not find elsewhere. It's not there because we create it; our belonging is something that God gives us.

I can easily say that the church is a gift of God. It's been my experience. In the church, I have found my home and my hope, my voice and my place. In this fragile and sometimes stumbling Presbyterian Church, I have known grace and witnessed resurrection. It is because of this church that I have learned to confess Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior — all grace on grace.

There is a moment in this text that I love. It says there were Parthians and Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia there. Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, Jews and Arabs — they were all there. They came from all over the world. And Luke tells us how they are not alike. They speak different languages; they have different cultures; they come from all over the globe.

But before the sun sets, they recognize in a new way that they belong to one another. The differences in culture and tongue are not erased. They remain. But they are no longer definitive of the people. What defines them is a reality of belonging. I imagine that came as a healing word. God's Spirit announced to a disparate people, "You are all my family; you belong."

We live in a lonely culture. I don't need a scientist to tell

me that, but I remember reading about John Caciopo. He is at the University of Chicago in the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience. He has written a book called *Loneliness*. In it, he notes that those who experience chronic loneliness have elevated levels of epinephrine in their blood. It's a stress hormone. And white blood cell counts are altered. He writes, "When we are lonely, our whole body is lonely."¹

Moss Hart was a playwright who died in the early 1960s. In his autobiography, he told of a moment of his childhood. He grew up in what he described as "a drab tenement in the Bronx in New York." It was Christmas Eve, and he was 10 years old. His father said to him, "Let's go downtown." They set out for 149th Street, where lots of vendors had pushcarts full of toys lined up for last minute shoppers.

It was clear that his father intended to buy him a Christmas gift. When they got to where all the vendors were, they went over to each cart, and Hart pointed out all the toys that he liked. But when his father asked the price, it was always too much, and the pair moved on quietly to the next cart. This continued as they went from cart to cart, his father with one hand in his pocket fingering the few coins he had saved up. Nothing the boy wanted was within his father's means.

Here is what Hart wrote years later, as he recounted his feelings that night: "As I looked up at him, I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in my life. I

wanted to throw my arms around him and say, ‘It doesn’t matter. ... I understand. ... This is better than [anything in these carts]. ... I love you!’

“But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment — then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home. ... I didn’t even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. ... Nor did I ever tell him how close I felt that night — that for a little while, the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away, and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.”²

It doesn’t always make sense, but what seems true in human experience is that it is not easy for us to find each other. We can be with people all day long and still not connect. We can talk to people and still not really communicate. It is easy, even in the crowds of our lives, to be lonely.

You made some promises this morning because you are the church. You made some promises that these babies who were baptized will always have a place to belong. That’s a gift in a lonely world.

But that’s not the whole of it. The church is not just a family, but it is a family shaped by the life of Christ; a community that lives as the body of Christ. It is a community striving to be an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. Or as we say at Village, we are living toward God’s promised day.

To speak of such things, we must be honest about how far we are from such claims. We have

witnessed once again this week the particular injury that results when people of faith are mean and judgmental — and even violent. That is hard enough. But when they act in such a way, professing to do so in the name of God, it brings a particular injury.

I will never forget when I read the work of the great Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell. He wrote words that stopped me in my tracks. He wrote, “We cannot help to recognize it as a gracious providence that they have been brought to our shores in such great numbers.” He was writing 150 years ago, and he was writing that men and women and children who were brought from the shores of Africa to the American shores to live in slavery ... he said it was a gracious providence — a gift of God, he said, to the slave.

He was one of the most significant theological minds of the 19th century, and he justifies slavery as a blessing of God.

I, like you, with the benefit of 150 years, recognize slavery was never a blessing, and it was never of God. It was simply sinful.

You know, all of these sermons are on our website; and folks say that once something is online, it never goes away. That terrifies me. I know the shelf life of a sermon is about eight minutes — if it’s a good one. I can only imagine how small-minded and unfaithful these words will appear in time.

My point is, to confess the church as a community shaped by the life of Christ, a community living toward God’s promised day, a community striving to

be an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world, is not a statement of our goodness. It is a statement that we know God works through ordinary people to bring grace and resurrection in this world.

The church was God’s idea, and God will continue to work through this fragile and frightened, broken and stumbling people, like fathers and sons who struggle with distance — and like James Henley Thornwell, who is blind to the beauty in his neighbor, like you and me. Through ordinary folks like us, God will work grace and resurrection.

So with no embarrassment at all, I say you are the body of Christ. You are an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. You are living toward God’s promised day.

It is true, not because we are righteous, but because the generous love of God is faithful and relentless and will keep on showing up among us.

¹“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2012

²Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding* (1966), p. 35

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.