

The Forgotten Gift
I Corinthians 10:1-13
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Today we are continuing our summer sermon series on “receiving the spirit ~ embracing our gifts.” I don’t know about you but I’m anxious to get to the specific gifts in chapters 12-14 but we’re following Paul’s order of things in his letter to the church in Corinth. So today we’re going to look at an essential gift that is easily forgotten, a gift that we just read about in the tenth chapter of I Corinthians. But first, let’s start with a story that will help guide us. Recently, a Jewish teenager was babysitting a seven-year-old conservative Jewish girl. As the teenager was putting the child to bed, the child, like a lot of children started asking questions to delay the inevitable “lights out.” Questions about being a teenager, questions about college, and then questions about religion; the little girl asked if the teenager knew a Christian, when the teen said yes, the little girl’s curiosity was spiked and she couldn’t get enough. The questions flowed from her like a steady stream. What are Christians like? Are they nice? Do Christians celebrate Hanukah? What do Christians believe? The teenager answered the questions best she could, explaining the similarities and differences between the two faiths. Both believing in the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, both believing in Moses and trying to follow the Ten Commandments, and the major difference in the perspective and experience of Jesus, one as another prophet and the other as the Messiah, then, instead of lights out, the light when on for the seven-year-old, and she exclaimed, “you mean Judaism gets siblings?” This fact is what Paul was telling the Corinthians in chapter ten.

Paul speaking to a primarily Gentile community refers to “our ancestors” as a way to show them that they are grafted into “the family.” The Israelites story is their story and our story; it’s a shared story because “we’re siblings.” Paul uses highlights from the Israelites wilderness journey as a way to illustrate for us things about God and truths about ourselves, the people of God. In the wilderness, the Israelites complained. They complained about God to Moses and about Moses to God. They complained that even the worst days in Egypt were better than the best days in the wilderness. Some paraphrases may be, “way to go Moses, what are we going to do wade in the water, the Red Sea is kind of deep, you know, and the Egyptians are really close...what’s your plan?” Moses trusting in God touches the sea and as God parted the sea so shows us the heirs years later that even our most insurmountable challenges will be broken down into parts we can move through.

The next thing we learn from our older sibling in the wilderness is the effects of ingratitude. A paraphrase here may have been something like this, “even though we were slaves in Egypt, at least we weren’t starving!” So God fed the Israelites with manna from heaven and gave them water from a rock, providing for them and illustrating for us that God will take care of us. Or another paraphrase of ingratitude could be, “Good job Moses, you brought us out here and now we are wandering around lost in the wilderness....” So God provides a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them and to show us thousands of years later that the Spirit who led a lost people into the Promised Land continues to lead us into the abundant life Jesus promised.

The complaints and the ingratitude were not the worst sins of the wilderness however, that would have to be the Golden Calf. The tangible reminder of the abandonment of the Israelites faith in God in spite of God's faithfulness to them: God's faithfulness is the forgotten gift. God is faithful, Paul proclaims; and uses the Israelites story to illustrate that for the Corinthians, and for us, with a warning to learn from their mistakes.

The warning for the Corinthians was in regard to food offered to idols. Some of the Corinthians were over confident in their spiritual maturity that eating such meals and participating in pagan services would not make a difference to them; they felt they were beyond such menial measures. They felt they had a superior power to withstand temptations or dangers of being unfaithful to Christ. In essence, Paul was saying, "watch out, pride goes before a fall." Paul did not want them to become lax in their faithfulness to Christ. Paul did not want them to forget God's gift of faithfulness, so he uses this chapter that Calvin calls a chapter of "comfort from the past and hope for the future."

Comfort and hope, this is the essence of the effects of the forgotten gift of God's faithfulness to us. Like the Israelites, at times, especially hard and challenging times; economic crises, illness, change, we complain and are ungrateful. And we may know enough to avoid making a golden calf, but that doesn't mean we don't have idols! We even have a show by that name ~ American Idol, but our idols aren't one. They are many: money, self-gratification, position, possessions, and power to name a few. Idols may be meaningless but they are not powerless. They have power over us; they influence our attitudes and our actions. Faithful followers throughout the centuries have had to ask and answer for themselves; how can I fit into the social world of my surrounding culture? What is acceptable accommodation and what is unacceptable compromise? Like the Corinthians, we can be overconfident in our spirituality and believe we have the power to do things on our own. Paul is saying no! Paul is telling us to say no! No to complaining. No to ingratitude. No to idols. Yes, to God's faithfulness.

God's faithfulness is seen in God's presence and guidance, provision and protection, care and compassion. Tests, trials, temptations come into every life, individual and communal, we can look backwards and say, it was better then...back in Egypt or back in the 50's, back last year before the economic crises, back before this illness or that death, back before the change, back, back, back. And yes, it may have been better back then and there, but we can't live in the past...we have to live in the present, looking to God in and with hope for the future. Like the light of insight that little girl had before bed, the light of awareness and insight must be illumined in our own lives in order that we can shine light in our daily lives on the forgotten gift of God's faithfulness. Reminders of that gift are all around us, if we can open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to let the light shine. Let me share one with you a small flicker of light in a poem I wrote while on vacation in Maine last week.

Tiny wind spurred waves
Ripple across the bay
Sunlight dancing on the cress
Reflecting with each gentle touch on the sandy shore,
God is faithful
Flowers in full array turning toward the noon day sun,
Golden yare, red-orange honeysuckle.
Lavender mallows, purple dianthus.
Bee bam ready to burst in bloom
Witnessing to the wonder of the touching truth
God is faithful
Birds flit in, and out, and all around
Yellow finches. Chickadees. Ruby throated birds humming
Coming to eat. Coming to drink
Sustenance for a day or for a migratory journey
Recalling for us with every turn at the feeders,
the touch of God's grace to even the sparrows,
God is faithful.
Small children splashing, rolling in the water
Covered in sand, holding a parent's hand
Laughing, sharing, playing with a sibling
Reminding us with each tender touch
God is faithful
In the quiet busy-ness of this peaceful place
In every place where eyes and ears and hearts are open...
No complaints. No idols, just deep gratitude for
Reminder, after reminder, after reminder
Of God's forgotten gift
God is faithful.
Thanks be to God!

Amen