

Peter Bankson: We have this Gift to Give

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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We have this Gift to Give

Scripture

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

"Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this

woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

(Luke 7:36-8:3)

Introduction

We are celebrating Pentecost, the birth of the Church, a season that marks the amazing flow of gifts from God – through the people of God and out into the world. This is a time for us to strengthen and deepen our connections with the Creator, guided by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is a time to recognize the commitment that holds us in tension with the culture. It is a time to learn how gifts and skills are opened up by our spiritual practices, and how our commitments help keep us right-side up.

Pentecost is a time to become more aware of the marvelous gifts of God, and more committed to the flowing of those gifts

into the world – and learn how to be disciples of giving.

There is a kite flying above the altar table, bound by a thin string to the cross, sailing over us, its tail fluttering in our midst. Two weeks ago, on the day of Pentecost, Julia said that the kite was a sign of the Holy Spirit. This morning I hope to add a detail or two to that understanding. To do that, I want to offer some images of gifts and how central gifts are to our understanding of faith in God through Christ.

In the Gospel lesson for this week we have one of those all-too-familiar stories of Jesus' outreach to the people of his day, the story of the woman who barged into a dinner party at the Pharisee's home, washed Jesus feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and anointed them with precious ointment. What a gift!

For this, she was scorned by the Pharisee – branded as “that kind of woman.” It was as though the Pharisee, a righteous man, saw her gift as an effort to buy something from Jesus. But Jesus received her gift, saw through the stereotype to the love that filled her heart, and blessed in her the truth of God's love. Speaking of the woman at his feet, Jesus told the Pharisee and his friends: “her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Notice that he did **not** say, “I forgive your sins.” I think that's important. First, she experienced something deeply healing – we see that as God's love. Then, she passed it along. And as she gave, she experienced a new level of peace.

First the love; then, in response, the gift; and **then** the peace that passes all understanding.

So here are three things to think about as you watch the kite:

- First, let God's love find you;

- In response, pass along the gift you have received;
- Then you will wake up to the crazy “peace” of God.

Letting God’s Love Find You

Connecting with God’s love isn’t always easy, especially for those who feel that they aren’t doing such a bad job of living a righteous life. The Pharisee models the problem nicely for us. After all, as a righteous leader of the community, he probably observed the law, honored his commitments and paid his debts. He’s openly scornful of the woman. Who did she think she was, coming into his home and disrupting what he hoped would be an opportunity to take Jesus to task for his counter-cultural actions earlier in the day?

Just before this passage in the 7th chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke is a description of Jesus’ meeting with some disciples of John the Baptizer. They had come to ask Jesus a question from John: “Are you really the Messiah?” He told them to observe what was happening: those who were blind could see; the lame were walking without a limp; the lepers were healed; the deaf could hear again; the dead were coming back to life; and the poor were hearing the Good News. Clearly, something wonderful was happening.

Many who heard John were being convinced, and baptized by John. Many ... but not the Pharisees. They rejected God’s plan for them and refused John’s baptism. Jesus called them a group of children playing with their friends, arguing over the rules of the game. Even then it was easier for the leaders and teachers to argue over the rules than to grow in their understanding of their relationship with God and let that relationship grow deeper.

But the woman with the jar of ointment got it. She, who had much to be forgiven for, could feel the power of God’s love and respond to it. In her hunger and her need for God, she had done what she needed to do to open up, to spread her self into

the wind of God's love and soar over her past into a new life. And, she was ready to give thanks. She took her alabaster jar and went, uninvited by the Pharisee, to the party.

Look at the kite. See how the sticks hold the fabric open? Without those sticks, this kite would be a crumpled rag blown along by the wind, not a source of wonder and delight.

My sense is that the woman with the ointment did not come quickly to her encounter with Jesus. It took guts to go against the ways of her people, to give up the life she had known, to take her savings and buy the ointment, to barge in on the dinner party. But she had the discipline, so when love drew her in she was able to respond.

Watch the kite:

- First, let God's love find you;
- In response, pass along the gift you have received;
- Then you will wake up to the crazy "peace" of God.

Passing Along the Gift You Have Received From God

What passes for gift-giving these days is often a duty, or an investment. I give because, in some subtle way, I expect to get fair value in return. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Isn't that how it feels sometimes when you are shopping for Christmas presents for cousins, or for a wedding gift for someone you don't really know?

But that is **not** what I see in the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. She was moved by a deeper love, and it gave her the strength to turn something that was lovely but material into something that was wonderful and relational. Her ointment was an offering to God, shared with someone who had helped her experience God's love.

About ten years ago Philip Hyde wrote an interesting book,

called "The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property." In it, he teases the idea of "gift" out of the clutches of the "economy." True gifts, he argues, can **not** be repaid. If a gift can be repaid, it's an investment. That's not bad, just different.

In this sense, for the Pharisee, the ointment looked like an investment, an effort to get something from Jesus. But to Jesus and the woman, it was a gift, a willing response to the love of God.

When we offer financial support as a community to people who are far away, I think we want to be making a gift. But that's not always easy. We also want to build relationships with the Carpenters or Vicki Guzman, or the folks from Muka. With relationships come expectations, and the gift is on the road to becoming an investment. Then we start doing cost-benefit analysis, and looking for goals and accountability.

Don't get me wrong, none of this is bad. It is the way of our people. Look at the discussion over government funding for "faith-based initiatives." The government is considering making investments in these organizations, not gifts. For the government, this investment is a reasonable idea, but not an expression of thanks for the saving love of God.

The kite has a tail. When it is flying the tail keeps it steady. But, in the wind the sight of that tail is pure gift. It takes the sticks to hold the kite fabric firm in the wind, but the freedom of the tail is a delight.

So let me remind you of the story of the woman washing Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair, and the kite, and the three things you're thinking about:

- First, let God's love find you;
- In response, pass along the gift you have received;
- Then you will wake up to the crazy "peace" of God.

Waking Up to the Crazy Peace of God

There's a line that ends so many worship services that it may have become a cliché: "May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus..." The peace that passes all understanding. The crazy peace of God.

I think that must have been what the woman felt when her jar of ointment was empty, and she left the party and went back into the street, her hair carrying the aroma of the ointment to all those around her. The crazy Peace of God.

Finding a community where that kind of peace is nurtured can be a challenge. In Seekers Church, our call is to be church – "a 'Seekers community" which comes together is weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives." That can be gift, if we'll let it.

Our call is to be church, but gathering here on Sunday morning is clearly not all that means. We are called to be a body that can support folks like that woman, who can offer the gifts we have received from God, taking our jars of ointment out to find the feet of Christ in our communities and our work places. Together and separately, we are called to bring justice to those to whom God is sending us.

One of the characteristics of congregations represented at the Pastoral Summit was their sense of mobilization. In this time of temporary loyalty and limited commitment, many of them are turning mobility into mobilization. People come because they are hungry. They stay because they are fed. And once they recognize that the gifts they have been given are theirs to share, they find ways to break into the Pharisee's dinner party and offer these gifts to Christ, out of love and thanksgiving.

Vital congregations are mobilized congregations – communities with a mission. They understand that the gifts they have been given are theirs to share, not to hoard. And so they look for ways to feed the hungry, and help heal the sick, and clean up the environment, and visit the prisoners, and work for justice with mercy in the places God has called them to live. Around here we call that the “outer journey.” And, as we imagine what it will be like to have a place of our own, those visions are beginning to take wing. It may be a while before they catch the wind, but I hear the stirrings from many of us. Community mobilization takes time. We’ll need vision, blessing, collaboration, and forgiveness all held and guided by the Holy Spirit. But the wind is blowing, and we have this kite in our hands. Are we ready to fly?

What does it take to wake up to the crazy Peace of God? It takes time, sure. And it takes commitment. We need to hang in there long enough to find this new balance. My guess is that the woman who’d anointed Jesus’ feet looked at her checkbook more than once as she thought about that night. Maybe she even framed the canceled check, as a celebrative reminder. And, when her commitment to God grew weak, then she was in for a rough time. I hope she had a small group to help her find strength.

On the spring overnight I was part of the kite flying crew. I had one of my favorites way up high ... its long tail whipping in the wind. The wind was calm on the ground, but so strong up there that it made the string sing. For me there is something wonderful when a kite finds its voice and the string begins to sing.

Just as I was showing Marian and her friend how the string was singing, it broke under the strain of the strong wind. And instantly, without its connection to the ground, without the ability to receive the force of the wind, the kite fluttered aimlessly down and the gift of its tail was lost in a jumble of confusion. A kite needs a string to fly. We need to hold

onto that commitment to know the crazy Peace of God.

Conclusion

Today we're sending off our third AIDS ride team. The riders have given a BIG part of their lives to support those with AIDS, and Seekers Church has received \$2,270.00 to support them. May their journey be a gift from all of us. May those blue bandannas be transformed into kite tails for our riders.

This afternoon, Meg Kinghorn and Casey Willson will give themselves to each other in marriage. May they each be gifts – as well as good investments!

Think about it. The kite is a gift. I know of few people – most of them kite store owners – for whom kites are a good investment. But for me, and for all of us who gathered in the warm spring sun on the overnight to watch them fly, kites are, as Julia said, a sign of the Holy Spirit.

But here's the secret, the esoteric wisdom: to fly, these kites need frames to hold their fabric into the wind, tails to keep them on an even keel, and strings to keep them in relationship with the wind that gives them life. Pentecost is a time to become more aware of the marvelous gifts of God, and more committed to the flowing of those gifts into the world – and learn how to be disciples of giving.

- First, we can develop the discipline to open ourselves, and let God's love find us;
- In response to that love, we can pass along the gifts we have received from God;
- Then we will wake up to the crazy, unconventional "peace" of God, where it really IS more blessed to give than to receive.

Amen.