

Date: March 16, 2014
Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17
Title: Gifts Seen and Unseen

New Orleans is a wonderful town,
and we had a wonderful time there.
The gift of time away
gave me the opportunity
to read some good books,
eat lots of great seafood,
listen to some amazing music,
and see some interesting sights.

It was a great vacation
even though things did not go
exactly as we planned.
George's work took him away for two days,
and we both got sick.
But, we refused to let
those minor inconveniences spoil our joy.
For the gift of time away,
I thank you.

Have you ever noticed
that some people have a tendency
to minimize both gifts and givers?
Perhaps, we do that,
because we incorrectly think
that gifts indebted us to the giver,
and very few of us
like to be indebted
to another person.

Yet, isn't the idea
that our good is bound up
with the good of others
at the heart of our democratic
way of life?

And more importantly,
the giving of good gifts
is an essential characteristic

of our gracious God.
The giving of good gifts for no other reason
than the desire to give to another is a holy act.
Both of today's scripture readings give us
an intimate glimpse of God's generous heart.
In the First Reading,
God gives Abraham a promise,
a promise that through his righteous acts
he will be a blessing
to all the nations of the world.
In the Second, we hear
that God's great love for the world
leads God to give the world
the only begotten son.
What is suggested in the First Reading
is clearly stated in the Second ~
love is the basis of every good gift.

Perhaps, you have seen the video
of three-year-old Emily James
that went viral last week.
Realizing that Emily's long hair
was becoming impractical to keep,
her mother told her
about a decision she had made
when she was in high school.
She cut her hair and donated it
to children with cancer,
who had lost their hair.
When Emily heard her mother's story,
she decided she, too, wanted to cut her hair
and donate it to children with cancer.
She also wanted her doll, Rapunzel,
to get her hair cut.
In the video, Emily says,
"I don't want any kids to be sad
that they have no hair.
What I want to do is give them my hair."
Emily's decision, prompted by her mother's story,

was an outrageous act
of love and mercy.
After Emily's hair was her hair cut,
her mother explained,
"We hope to instill an attitude of giving
in all our kids.
We want them to realize
that everything we have
is a blessing from God
and it is really important to give to others
when we can."

(www.today.com/moms/3-year-olds-haircut...).

Sadly, there are times in our lives
when we do not recognize the gift
or the giver.
Nicodemus is such a person.
He is in the dark.
It is a darkness caused
by what he knows
and doesn't know.
His worldview prevents him
from receiving the gift
Jesus has for him.
To help Nicodemus see the gift in front of him,
Jesus tells him
he must be born again.
Now, Nicodemus is a practical man.
He knows he cannot
enter his mother's womb again.
Yet, it is his practicality, his mindset, his worldview
that keeps him from hearing
Jesus' invitation to be born again
by being born from above
through water and the Spirit.

We may wonder about Nicodemus' inability
to comprehend what Jesus is saying to him.
We live in a culture steeped in "born again" language.

When we hear “born again,”
we understand its meaning.
We understand that what is meant
is a re-orientation of heart and mind
through the power of the Holy Spirit.
That understanding
was not abroad in the culture
when in darkness
Nicodemus went to see Jesus.

While we may get it,
we are not so very different from Nicodemus.
We, too, voice our incredulity of those things
that do not conform to our world view,
our understanding of right and wrong,
our perception of truth.

The book, *My Name Is Asher Lev*,
tells the story of Asher Lev’s struggle
to be true to his deepest self.

While still a child,
Asher discovers a passion
and a rare talent for art.

In many families such a discovery
would be met with acceptance,
if not joy and celebration.

But, not in Asher’s family,
for they are Hasidic Jews,
and Asher’s father is a special envoy for the Rebbe,
the spiritual leader
of the community.

Asher’s father views artists with suspicion
and fears art will lead Asher
away from the faith
and into darkness.

Asher’s determination to pursue an art career
gives rise to a bitter and acrimonious feud
between his father and him.

Frequently, Asher’s mother is triangulated
into the situation

with both husband and son
pulling on her to at least
remedy the situation
or better yet,
make it go away
completely.

Years later, as a young artist
with several NY shows behind him,
Asher conceives and creates a painting
of what it must have been like for his mother
to have been pulled on
by the two people she loved.

He paints her hanging
on the living room window in their apartment
with her arms stretched out to her sides
and her legs hanging down.

On one side of her is her husband;
on the other, her son.

They are looking at her and each other.

Asher says he created the painting
“For all the pain you suffered,
my momma.

For all the torment
of your past and future years,
my momma.

For all the anguish this picture
will cause you.

For the unspeakable mystery
that brings good fathers and sons into the world
and lets a mother watch them
tear each other’s throats.

For the Master of the Universe,
whose suffering world
I do not comprehend. . . .

For all of these I created this painting –
an observant Jew working on a crucifixion
because there was no aesthetic mold
in (my) own religious tradition

into which I could pour
a painting of ultimate
anguish
and torment.”

Asher's painting creates a breach in his relationship
with his parents,
his family,
and the people in his faith community.

The Rebbe tells Asher
he has crossed a boundary
and is now beyond his help.

Then, he suggests
that Asher leave New York City
and go to Paris,
which he does
less than twenty-four hours later.

Asher leaves,
because those he loves the most deeply
cannot receive the gift he has for them.

They cannot see,
because the cross is an anathema to them.

As God gave Jesus
to bless the world and her people,
so through Jesus God sends people
with their own unique gifts
into our lives to bless us.

Yet, we sometimes hesitate
to accept the gift,
and we are sometimes hesitant
to welcome the giver.

We allow our worldview,
our understanding of right and wrong,
our perception of truth
to turn us away from the person
and the gifts they offer.

When we do that,
we not only wound the person,

but we also diminish
our world and ourselves.

We can be certain

that God is always working in our lives
to open us to good gifts
and the ones who offers them.

As we are opened up,

we are enabled to live into our lives
with hope, kindness, and mercy.

This, dearly beloved, is the blessing way of God,
for God came to shine light
in the dark places of our world
and each of us. Amen.