

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

HEARTLAND STEWARDSHIP CONFERENCE

ROCHELLE A. STACKHOUSE

Adam and Eve had it all: enough food to satisfy any hunger of their bodies, beauty surrounding their every step, the companionship of the wide variety of created beings, a soul mate to be a partner through the days, and the intimate presence of God in their midst. It's what we call, "Paradise." But paradise included a tempter and forbidden fruit, and Eve and Adam succumbed to the temptation to want more than perfection. They ate, they were ashamed, they blamed and they were cast out of paradise by a God who was very angry indeed. For their disobedience, Adam and Eve were each cursed as punishment for disobeying the one restriction God had placed in their lives. In line with this scriptural tale, artists depict this moment as an angel with a flaming sword escorting the first couple out of Eden and blocking them from returning forever.

But right in the middle of all this cursing and assigning flaming-sworded angels to guard duty, we hear in Genesis 3 verse 21 about God doing something seemingly out of character with anger and punishment: "And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife and clothed them." Remember that in the garden they had been naked, and neither did they feel ashamed about that, nor apparently were they cold. But now they were not in Eden, and the climate and living conditions threatened their bodies' warmth and health. Of course, they didn't know what it would be like out there or how to prepare; fig leaves weren't going to cut it, but they didn't know that. God, of course, knew exactly where they were going and what they would need to survive. So the divine seamstress/tailor sat down and sewed up some animal skins to keep these two recalcitrant children safe and warm.

After the first sin and the first curses which would mark what we call the Fall of humanity, humanity received the first gifts from God: clothing to keep them warm until the day when we might put on the armor of salvation and begin a trek to a new Eden.

These clothes would be only the first gifts God would give to people throughout the Biblical story. If we think together for just a few minutes, many others come to mind. The child Isaac, "laughter," was given to Abraham and Sarah in promise of a new nation. Hagar in the wilderness weeping after having been cast out by Sarah and Abraham with her son, Ishmael, cries out to God, and God points her to water provided to save both their lives. Moses is given the staff of power to bring down plagues and part the waters of the sea. The wandering Israelites are given the Ten Commandments on their stone tablets to order the life of the new nation. Saul and the armies of Israel facing Goliath are given David with his five smooth stones to slay the giant. Jesus tells of a son, who has wasted his life, who returns home to be given new clothing and a great celebration. On a beach after Jesus' resurrection, he cooks breakfast for Peter and the other disciples who had been out all night restlessly fishing.

In each of these cases and others we will name, those who received the gift definitely had a need, but in each case the gift is much more than something that meets an immediate need. God does not, as Bill Green says, just "give," but rather in these cases and others, God "gifts" the

people so that they are then “gifted.” I want to spend the first part of this address with you exploring the nature of God as giver and how God’s gifts make the recipients “gifted.”

First, God’s gifts always address a need, but not always the need the recipients think they have. Adam and Eve had no clue that they needed those clothes. Saul and his generals thought what they needed was a new legion of strapping young men with swords to defeat the giant. The people of Israel wandering in the wilderness thought that a shiny golden calf and a great party met their needs better than 10 laws written on pieces of stone. Some of Jesus’ followers thought what God should have sent was a great military leader to defeat the Roman oppressors, not an itinerant preacher and healer. One of the most difficult parts of understanding the theology of prayer and of the character of God for Christians is coming face to face with the reality that God is not Santa Claus. I came face to face with this in my own life as I struggled through years of infertility. I was very clear on what I needed God to give me, and that was a pregnancy. Finally I came to understand that God was eager to gift me with a child, but that this child (indeed three children) did not need to come from my body. When we are able to look beyond our definition of need to see the possibility of gifts being given to meet needs we may not know we have or in ways we cannot even begin to imagine, that’s when we are able to see ourselves as gifted by God and not merely needy recipients of God’s generosity or benevolence. We are also then able to get beyond the disappointment that the gift we received was, perhaps, not what we thought we needed or wanted and discover the delightful surprises God has in store for us when we let go of control and receive what God wants to give.

The second quality of God as gifter and the gifts God does give us are that they are unfailingly empowering. God does not give us gifts to make us dependent, but to strengthen and empower us, in the words of Garrison Keillor, “to get up and do what needs to be done.” Adam and Eve put on their clothes and faced the new world outside the garden. Hagar received water in the wilderness, but also a call from God to get up and take her son and make a new life with the promise that he, like his brother Isaac, would become a “great nation.” Moses sat barefoot beside that burning bush quite sure that he did not have the gifts God needed to free the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, but God pointed to that piece of wood Moses thought was to be used to herd sheep and gave it (and therefore Moses) power to do wonders. One of the best modern examples of this kind of gifting can be found in Heifer Project, International and the stories they share of children receiving animals and getting not just milk or meat, but the possibility of going to school and taking on a leadership role in their village or society.

The natural corollary to this empowering character of the gifting God is that the gifts don’t just empower us to be all that we can be for our own pleasure and prosperity, but to fulfill what God needs *from* us for God’s purposes in the world. In other words, it’s not all about us, (re: God is not Santa Claus). Isaac wasn’t just meant to fulfill Sarah and Abraham’s desire for a child, but to begin a nation of witnesses. Moses wasn’t going on the carnival circuit with that staff to make the big bucks in the side show. Peter wasn’t just being treated to breakfast by the lake because he was such a nice guy and had been through a really rough time. After feeding Peter, Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” To take an example from popular culture, another Peter, Peter Parker, AKA Spiderman, is told by his uncle, “With great power comes great responsibility.” We also say it this way, “to whom much has been given, from that one much shall be required.” Those who are gifted are called not to hide their light under a bushel, but to show that light for all the world to see.

And most of those who are gifted and recognize the source of the gifts as God feel compelled to share the gift, sometimes reluctantly, but often with great joy. Do you remember Peter and John in the book of Acts meeting a lame beggar? "Silver and gold have I none, but in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" Their enthusiasm, sprung from their own empowerment by Jesus, was so contagious that not only did the man get up and walk; he went leaping and praising God! Although Moses found it difficult and painful at times, he kept going back to Pharaoh with the call to "Let my people go." Is this, perhaps, one meaning of the pronouncement in Genesis 1 that we are created in the image of God? Is it in our impulse to take our gifts and then use them to gift others?

If that is true, then perhaps our greatest need in understanding God as gifting and ourselves as gifted is to uncover that image. The final character of the gifting God I want to address this evening moves us in that direction. God gives gifts in the context of relationships; God's giving is intimate and relational. Of all of these important characteristics of the gifting God, this is the one I would stress most. God gives, God gifts, in the midst of relationships, to strengthen relationships, to honor relationships, to create relationships, and with the intimacy of one desiring deep and fruitful relationships. In our relationships with God, we not only receive gifts, but we discover the gifted nature of the image of God within us which empowers us to make new relationships, giving and gifted. It is because of that primary relationship with God that we are excited to give as God has given us.

That first gift in Eden reflected this, when God sought a partner for Adam and created two new creatures by altering the first one and therefore creating humanity in relationship and in the image of the Creator, thus establishing two relationships of intimacy: creatures intimate with each other and with the God whom they resemble in some way. Remember that God's very nature, in Trinitarian theology, is a relational being. Out of Eden, God continued the relationship, and that little verse with which I started these reflections illustrates that beautifully. Look at the intimacy of this act of fashioning clothing for these naked, foolhardy and vulnerable creatures? God dresses them, like a parent dressing a child, in effect showing them that despite being barred by flaming angel swords from the place where their relationship with God began, God still desires to be in relationship with them. Many of the most powerful moments of giving in the Bible reflect the centrality of relationships. Ruth, offering up her life in relationship with her mother-in-law Naomi: "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God." This gift was not given because Naomi was helpless or Ruth a passive victim. The relationship between them was itself an expression of giftedness and Ruth's gift of presence to Naomi grew out of that relationship. Moses' call at the burning bush with the gift of the staff is almost a courtship of God with Moses. Steven Spielberg beautifully captured this sense of that story in the fabulous animated film *Prince of Egypt*. As Moses sits on the ground, having heard God's mission for him and feeling overwhelmed, the film shows the gentle flames surrounding Moses like a soft blanket, and God saying, "O Moses, I will be with you." The intimacy of that breakfast on the beach as the risen Jesus feeds his disciples once again, along with that conversation with Peter, "do you love me?" shows us so clearly the relationship built over three years that would empower Peter joyously and energetically to devote the rest of his life to gifting the world as he had been gifted by God. And the text that many churches will be hearing in worship this Sunday, Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus, who had raised her brother Lazarus from death. Judas could not understand that her gift to Jesus did not come out of practicality and need, but out of their relationship and the depth of her love.

for him. They had a strong relationship before, but then Jesus gifted her with Lazarus, and she gave extravagantly to Jesus in love and gratitude. Her giving was rooted in their relationship.

So God as “gifter” gifts with what is needed, though sometimes in surprising and even unsettling ways. God’s gifting is meant to empower and strengthen and enable service. And God’s gifting always has a relational component to it. If we are indeed created in the image of God, those who have been gifted by God as heirs of God’s realm with our brother Jesus, then understanding who God is has implications for each of us and for the church as we consider giving and “gifting.” I want to suggest some connections now and then have us explore those connections more fully in questions and conversations tomorrow and Sunday.

First, the issue of need. I love the Consecrating Stewards program and I agree that giving to a church should not be based on a budget. However, I differ with those who recommend that we never talk about budget and need in a stewardship program. I think people should consider what the actual need of the church is. Hagar was certainly thankful that God perceived her need for water in the desert and didn’t just blithely tell her to buck up and take Ishmael and make a new nation! Adam and Eve were undoubtedly grateful for those clothes. But here’s where I would challenge us in our churches to pick up on this fact that God looks at “need” differently than we do and sometimes perceives our need to be different than what we think we need. Adam and Eve wanted to return to Eden and Hagar to Abraham, but instead God sent them out on a new mission. So one way to look at this in designing not only stewardship programs but church budgets is to consciously make room for the Holy Spirit. To make concrete this notion that in the year to come God might look at our budget and say, “Well, sure you need the money for that person or activity, but where I want you to go this year is going to require you to spend your money differently.” The church I serve has only tentatively stepped into this realm by setting aside a significant portion of their mission budget for what the budget line calls “Special Projects” but what the mission committee understands to be as-yet-unknown opportunities. What I am hoping to have us do next year in the entire church budget is explore ways to build in room for the Holy Spirit to work after a budget is passed and to encourage givers to understand that God may gift us with a mission, a project, an opportunity we have not yet imagined. Holy Spirit Budgeting. Understanding that God gifts us like this encourages us to a flexibility that is not very corporate but is very Biblical.

The second character of God’s gifting has to do with the empowering nature of that giving and its corollary that God gifts people for a larger purpose than their own need or desire. I work with an organization in New Haven that has adopted some of the principles of the community organizing movement known as the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) founded by Saul Alinsky among others. One of the foundational principles of this movement is known as the Iron Rule: “Never, ever, do for others what they can do for themselves.” Those of us who primarily see giving as “charity” need to think into this principle. As in the Heifer example, giving in the image of God has to do with empowering and with the corollary of that, empowering something or someone beyond yourself. When we give to our local churches, we do so in order to empower the church to have the resources to live into God’s call. That means having and using resources to empower each member of the church to live into their own giftedness (as in Paul’s description of the parts of the body in I Corinthians, empowering eyes to be eyes and hands to be hands). Traditionally, the church has called this Christian Formation or Discipling, and many churches need to pay more attention to this as a center of their mission.

5

When our local churches consider their mission giving (and it's time to lose that word "benevolence" with all the paternalistic charity that implies), we consider how we can empower others to live into their own giftedness, as we have been empowered by the church, as Moses empowered the Israelites to live into their calling as a new kind of community, what Isaiah would later call a "light to the nations." I actually think of OCWM like this: empowering folk in Cleveland, Indianapolis, Washington D.C., all our conferences and our partners overseas to live into their giftedness. We use our gifts when the church empowers us, but the church then has a great responsibility to push us to take our gifts and join them with others to help God work in the world.

Finally, we are called to think about the relational aspect of stewardship. Budget numbers, though important, rarely inspire truly great giving, but people often give in response to their relationships within the church. That's why so many churches encourage personal testimony as part of their stewardship program; people respond to stories, to the relationships of which they are a part in their church. They respond the same way to missionary relationships or to the stories that come out of disaster zones, as they did with Katrina. Part of what it means to be gifted as human beings is to be in relationship with one another, and the church at its best is involved not only in forming relationships with God, but with the other people in the pews and with the people of a community or a neighborhood and with other churches here or in other countries, and even with folk here in Cleveland!

But let's think for a moment about how we go about building relationships and nurturing relationships in the image of God, and this is where, oddly, many churches fall down on the job. How many times have I heard a story of someone getting angry at the church because the only time anyone had ever reached out to them was with a call for the annual stewardship drive! That reaching out wasn't to establish a relationship, but to accomplish a task, and we excel at tasks in the church. Building relationships is about something different altogether, it is about seeking out the giftedness of another person, not what they have to give. I'll say that again. Building relationships is about seeking out the giftedness of another person, not what they have to give.

I recently ran across a quote by Thomas Merton which gets at this. He said, "You think you can identify a [person] by giving date of birth and address, height, eye color and even fingerprints. Such information will help you put the right tag on a body if you should run across [it] somewhere full of bullets, but it doesn't say anything about the [person]. . . But if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live or what I like to eat or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person." (Merton, "My Argument With the Gestapo" New York, New Directions, 1969) Between those two answers is also the place where the church can help someone discover their giftedness and empower them to live fully for the thing for which they want to live, indeed are called to live.

That conversation between Ruth and Naomi that precedes Ruth making the oft-quoted commitment to go wherever Naomi goes is a conversation in which Naomi expresses what she has lived for and what is keeping her from living fully now. Ruth responds to that in seeking herself to understand what she has to live for. In the journey that follows, they discover the giftedness of one another in a compelling relationship that continues to inspire us today. The

kinds of relationships God establishes have the same quality of seeking out the giftedness of people and drawing out their gifts through a relationship of love and respect and expectation, a relationship which includes God expressing what God lives for and what is keeping God from living fully into that purpose as well as encouraging the other to look at his or her life in the same way. Mary, the mother of Jesus, the disciple Peter, the prophet Samuel; all of them discover gifts they had not previously understood, felt empowered to use them not only for their own purpose, but for God's, and all because of a relationship that grew out of a call to think deeply about their lives and hear how God thought deeply about the divine purpose. How can we in the churches do a better job of nurturing these kinds of relationships among our members and others with whom we are in mission? And how can we help people form and nurture this kind of relationship with God that will allow each of our giftedness to surface and thrive? These are stewardship questions!

I want to close by playing for you the segment of the Spielberg film I had mentioned earlier, this moment of formation of the relationship between Moses and God, where God helps Moses discern gifts and a mission he had not perceived before and the power to engage them, and where God promises him new relationships not only with the divine, but with people he didn't know were his family. See if you can identify the many layers of giftedness in this intimate, world changing moment.

Saturday: Explore the gifting circle (see next page)

Sunday: For what do you think you are living, in detail and what keeps you from living for it?

Ask the same question of your churches!