

Date: January 5, 2025

Texts: Jeremiah 31. 7-14 / Romans 6. 15-23

Title: "All Those Gifts..."

Intro -

cf. - a little time has past, but -
 all those gifts...
 filled to overflowing...
 probably still trying to figure out what to do with it all
and - to be clear -
 not talking about thew stuff under the tree...
 not even all the toys in Fellowship Hall for the Christmas Toy Drive
 (as pictured in the email -
 which everyone looked at with rapt attention...)
rather -
 looking back on the "Gifts of Christmas" as we explored these
 past several weeks -
 over the Sundays of Advent...
 leading up to Christmas:
 Gifts of: hope... love... joy... peace...
 the Gift of: Jesus
all those gifts...
 - what do they add up to?
 - what do we gain from them?

I) Eternal Life

cf. - Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans, and -
 draws our attention to the promise of eternal life
 (which kind of implies dying first, so...
 people approach this topic / idea from various angles)
some try humor (per Jack Handley) -

When I die, I want to go peacefully like my Grandpa did, in his sleep --
not screaming, like the passengers in his car.

or - I just read a list of "The 100 Things To Do Before You Die."
I was pretty surprised that "Yell for help" wasn't one of them.

alternately - a wonderful tribute to former president Jimmy Carter -
upon his death, and - with his thoughts about dying...
thoughts firmly grounded in his faith in Christ...
in his embrace of all the gifts that are his
because of Christ...

one of my favorite reflections (from his book - "The Virtues of Aging") -
"If our doctors tell us that we have a terminal illness and can expect to
live only another year, or five years, how would we respond?
In fact, we confront exactly the same question if we are still healthy and
have a life expectancy of fifteen or twenty more years."

maybe we could benefit from "a Beginner's Guide to Dying..."
a "Beginner's Guide to Eternal Life..."
to go along with all the other "Beginner's Guides" out there
fortunately...
we kind of do...
right here - in Romans - where Paul speaks to these matters
and - encourages us to:
"Give yourselves to God -
as those who have been brought from death to life"

all those gifts...
speak to us of the truth that the world has changed...
that our lives can change...
that we are set free for something altogether different...
altogether better
but - we have to make a choice in this...
we have to decide - somewhere along the line -

cf. - per Bob Dylan...

apparently, a big movie coming out...

but I remember the songs as he released them, and -
one in particular:

"You're gonna have to serve somebody" --

each and every person is required to serve.

"It may be the devil or it may be the Lord..."

"but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

His point is that we all have masters in this world,

and we can choose the one we want to serve.

But each of us has to serve somebody.

cf. - there are two considerations here:

1) "Presenting yourself to God" assumes that you recognize that

God has a claim on your life. And that -

there is no one more suited to exercise this claim...

no one more worthy...

and 2) this also assumes that having made yourself available

- having submitted your request form, your resume,

your LinkedIn profile...

you are now ready to receive your marching orders.

so now...

how does that prepare us for eternity...?

relate - it connects us a little more closely with what Jimmy Carter was saying

when he noted that whether we have one year to live, or -

twenty...

we look to live our lives in the presence of the same God -

here and now -

who will be with - forever -

as we embark on the adventure of eternal life

II) “Slaves of Righteousness”

cf. - not unrelated to the question of:

“What do you do... when you retire?”

being of a certain age, this is a topic of conversation

that has come up more than once...

you are “set free” (not necessarily from sin, even if it may feel

that way to some...)

- now what?

as Dylan says:

You’re gonna have to serve somebody...

You’re gonna have to find something to do...

You’re gonna need to build a life...

as your life changes

in Paul’s writings - he notes that we have been set free from slavery to sin

as such -

we should offer ourselves as “slaves to righteousness”

now...

we don’t much cotton to the idea of slavery - and, for good reasons

but -

the point Paul is making here - in the context in which he

lived and wrote - where slavery was a part of everyday life -

is this:

- we are all enslaved to *something* -- whether it's a *good* something

or a *bad* something....

or - it’s also possible that it is not completely one or the other...

i.e. - in this life... we struggle

in this life... we sometimes do bad things

in this life... we are “a work in progress”

but - in this life - we can attempt to do the right thing

when the choice is clear....

and - we can look for guidance from God... when it is not

i.e. - each of us has to make important choices about where
we will put our time and our energy...
- we can focus on achievements and acquisitions, or -
on our relationships with God and with the people around us.

These are critical choices -
because even the most successful people -
eventually die

and so, Paul says:

the choice is between being a slave "of sin, which leads to death,"
or a slave "of obedience, which leads to righteousness"

or...

that we must try, with the help of God, to set our course toward the
right thing - toward goodness and kindness.

cf. - one way to think of this is how we use the GPS on our phone or
in the car.

I know how to get to most of the places I want to get to, but -
will always plug it in just to check on traffic... slowdowns... etc.

often - my phone suggests an alternate route...

often - I stubbornly stick with the route I like...

and - sometimes - I pay the price for that decision

especially if it involves ignoring the advice to bypass

LGA on my way into NYC to see Austin, and take

the Throg's Neck up into the Bronx before

doubling back into Manhattan on the Tri-boro

(who would ever want to do that...?)

- 2 1/2 hours later, I wished I'd paid the extra toll...

we make choices all the time...

we may even have "good reasons" for making the choices we make...

but - if we began with the premise that the one whom we serve

has given us all we need...

because he loves us more than we could ever imagine...

then maybe - we'll trust his guidance (more than our own...)
and - we can echo the sentiments of Jimmy Carter, who wrote:

“I found I was absolutely, completely at ease about death...
[because] - I'm going to live again.”

all those gifts...

the gifts of Christmas...

the gifts of hope... joy... love... peace...

the gifts that are ours for right now...

are also ours for all eternity

- how can we best set ourselves up to enjoy this...?

per Paul's "Beginner's Guide" -

+ let God know your available...

+ do the right thing...

+ go where he leads you

may we remember the gifts God has given us, and -

may we offer ourselves to God as His servants...