

God's Lasting Gifts To Us

John 14:23-29

What would you do if you learned that you were going to die tomorrow? One person might get drunk. Another would go on a last-minute spending spree. Another would collapse in despair.

The great preacher and teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock tells of visiting a woman in her hospital room. She was facing surgery the next morning, and was totally panicked — scared to death. Craddock noticed that there were no devotional booklets or serious reading on her nightstand — but she did have a stack of movie magazines — that sort of thing. There wasn't one spiritual calorie in the whole “cotton-pickin' bunch” — and the woman wondered why she was so panicked. The truth is that she had no spiritual resources to deal with the storms of life.

But I suspect that if we were facing death, most of us would get together with our families to let them know that we loved them — to see what we could do to help them. In our Gospel lesson today, that's what Jesus is doing. He knows that he will soon be dead. He is not panicked at the prospect. He is not in despair. In fact, he seems not to be thinking about himself at all. He's trying to prepare his disciples for the terrible day that will soon dawn. He's trying to prepare them for the shock of the crucifixion. He knows that they will respond to his death with shock and grief. He knows that they will feel abandoned. He is trying to prepare them.

The disciples, of course, have no idea what is coming. They don't understand that Jesus is moving toward a cross. Only later, after the resurrection, will they understand.

To help the disciples, Jesus promises them two gifts: First he says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

Jesus has taught them many things, some of which they understood but much of which they did not. The Holy Spirit will take them to the next level. After the resurrection, when the disciples are better able to hear, the Holy Spirit will remind them of Jesus' teachings. Then the Holy Spirit will complete their instruction, teaching them everything. So Jesus' first gift to the disciples is the gift of the Holy Spirit — the gift of God's continuing presence — the gift of God's help when they need it — and who doesn't need God's help!

And then Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” (John 14:27) This second gift — this gift of peace — is related to the first gift — the gift of the Holy Spirit. The disciples will have peace, because God's spirit dwells within them. They will know that God loves them and is always present with them. They will be able to call on God at any time of the night or day.

Later, the Apostle Paul will put it this way. He will say, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) That's a great question, isn't it! Did you ever think about that? “If God is for us, who can be against us?” What Paul means, of course, is that if God is for us it doesn't matter who is against us.

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Sermon by Tom White

So to prepare his disciples for his upcoming death, Jesus promises his disciples two gifts: First, the gift of the Holy Spirit — the gift of God's presence — the gift of God's help. And second, the gift of peace. They will have peace because they will have the Holy Spirit — God's presence — God's help.

Christ makes these promises to us as well. We have not had the trauma of seeing Jesus crucified. We have not had Jesus taken from our midst. But God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit too. Those of us who have been baptized received the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism (Acts 2:38). God is with us. God is our defender. God is on our side. We need not fear. God gives us peace.

But this is not cheap grace. Jesus does not give gifts without accountability. He says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 14:23)

If we want the full blessing of Jesus' promise, we need also to hear what Jesus asks of us. He says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.”

Christ knows whether we love him, because he can see it in our lives. The world knows whether we love Jesus, because they can see it in our lives. If we love Jesus, we keep his word. And then we will have peace.

As Christians, we have peace, because God is on our side. God loves us and is with us. The question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side. Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.” If we are on God's side, we keep his word.

What is that word? What does it mean to keep Christ's word? For one thing, it means keeping his commandments —especially his commandment that we love one another — but it means more too. This Gospel starts by saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:1, 14)

In other words, Jesus is God's Word. Jesus is the way that God makes himself known to us. Jesus is the Word, and he calls us to “obey (his) teaching.” What he is really calling us to do is to go beyond a rule book to faithfulness. He is calling us to be faithful to him personally.

Some time back, people started wearing bracelets that read, “WWJD” — which means “What Would Jesus Do?” Their idea was that, when faced with a tough decision, we should ask, “What would Jesus do?” — and then we should do that. We should do what Jesus would do — and choose what Jesus would choose. By doing that, we become faithful to Christ. We honor Christ. And, in the process, we position ourselves to receive Christ's blessings.

As I was thinking about that, it caused me to think about Tiger Woods, especially when he was young. Tiger had a very close relationship with his father, Earl Woods, who was a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel who served two tours in Vietnam as a Green Beret. Tiger's real name is Eldrick, but his father nicknamed him Tiger after a Vietnamese Army Colonel who bore that nickname.

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Tiger's father introduced Tiger to golf while Tiger was still a toddler and trained him as he was growing up. He taught Tiger golf, and he taught him values as well. In fact, the father wrote two books. One of them is entitled Training a Tiger.

Tiger's father died a year ago (May 3, 2006), but he and Tiger were always close. Tiger loved his father — treated him with respect — embodied his father's ideals. His success grew out of that relationship and honors that relationship. Sons look at that relationship and think, “I wish I had a father like that.” Fathers look at that relationship and think, “I wish I had a son like that.” When Christ calls us to keep his word, he is calling us to that kind of relationship with him — loving, faithful, and strengthening.

When we love Christ and keep his word, God confers a double blessing. He gives us the Holy Spirit, and he gives us peace. Those are special blessings for every age, but we especially need them today.

- We are affluent, but unsatisfied.
- We are surrounded by people, but lonely.
- We are inundated by sex, but frustrated.
- We are insured against every possible disaster, but insecure.

Augustine put it this way. He said:

“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

Christ calls us to love him and to keep his word so that God might live in us and through us—and so that we might have peace.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was the most famous preacher of his day but, as a seminary student, he suffered an emotional breakdown. He tried to commit suicide.

Years later, in his autobiography, he talked about that dark moment of his life. He told how his intelligence and wit had always made life easy. His determination had always carried the day. When the “going” got tough, he had always gotten tougher. But finally, he faced a situation he could not handle. He said of that moment, “Self-confidence became ludicrous.” The techniques that had brought him success now failed. He said, “I who had thought myself strong, found myself beaten, unable to cope, not only with outward circumstances, but even with myself. In that experience I learned some things...that theological seminaries do not teach. I learned to pray.”

And so he penned this prayer. Listen carefully. This could be the prayer that you need today. He prayed:

“O God in restless living,
We lose our spirit's peace.
Calm our unwise confusion.

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Bid thou our clamor cease.
Let anxious hearts grow quiet,
Like pools at evening, still,
Till Thy reflected heavens,
All our spirits fill.
Teach us beyond our striving,
The rich rewards of rest.
Who does not live serenely,
Is never deeply blest.
O tranquil, radiant Sunlight,
Bring Thou our lives to flower,
Less wearied with our own effort,
More filled with Thine own power.”

Jesus put it this way:

“Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Amen.