

Called by Your Gifts

1 Peter 4:7-11

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Continuing in the series of sermons on the call of God, we come today to the topic of how you are gifted to fulfill your calling. The most important thing to remember about your gifts is that they are, well, gifts.

The Apostle Peter begins our passage today by saying, "The end of all things is near." For some, like the persecuted church that first received Peter's letter, this is good news. If you are struggling through a hard time, if you hate your job, or if you are almost done with chemotherapy, it's encouraging to know that the end is near. For others, though, it sounds discouraging to hear that they are near the end. If you are in love, if you are moving away from friends, or if you're a presidential appointment -- of the last president -- it makes you sad to know the end has come.

All things come to an end: bad things, good things, dull things, beautiful things, and especially all living things. Anything that doesn't come to an end is not a creation, but a god. The end of all created things is near. Maybe even nearer than we think.

So what is Peter's next thought? Does he then say, "So hurry up, use your gifts, and get something significant accomplished?" No. Peter says, "So take the day seriously. With discipline and prayer." It's another way of saying, "Pay attention to the day you have."

This is one of the most important insights we have about God's calling in our lives. It is always focused on the present tense. The question is never who is God calling you to become? Forget about becoming. The question is who has God called you to be, and what has he called you to do today? The gifts God has invested into your life are not about the future. You don't know about the future. The end may be nearer than you think. All you have is today.

A few weeks ago a minister in our community was killed on his way to church. He thought he had more time, but the end was nearer than he thought. A little over a month ago I was lying in the emergency room with blood clots in my lungs. It occurred to me that the end could be nearer than I thought. And do you want to know what my next thought was? I wasn't thinking about the Sunday sermon (which is very uncharacteristic of me). I was thinking about the people I love. I was thinking about you, and I was glad that periodically I've told you that I love you. I don't want to wait until my retirement party to bring that up.

As one who has had the privilege of standing beside many deathbeds, I have discovered that is always what people are thinking about when the end is near. No one is thinking about their work. Everyone always thinks about the people they love. So it should not surprise us that Peter goes on to say, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another for love covers a multitude of sins."

So before we can even begin to talk about your gift as a musician, lawyer, butcher, baker, or candlestick maker, we have to remember that the primary gift of God is people to love. Today. This may not be the people you want to love or had dreamed of loving. You may not know these people very well. They may not even be your kind of people. But here we are -- the gift of God in your life. And with this gift comes God's call to love us. All of us. Even those of us who are really hard to love. In the words of Anne Lamott, "You can tell that you have pretty much re-created God in your own image when you discover that he hates the same people you do."

When Peter's letter was first read in the ancient church, don't you think that someone looked over at someone else who had caused a lot of hurt and thought, "Love her? I don't even like her." Well, you aren't told to like her. You're told to love her. I think God leaves it up to us to decide who we want to like, but we are commanded to love the gift of any person, however unwanted, he has brought into our lives. We have to love. It's necessary. Because "love covers a multitude of sins."

Certainly that is how we have received the love of God -- with a love that covers our multitude of sins. In his commentary on this passage, John Calvin characteristically hammers into us this word multitude. "You have a multitude of sins. A multitude!" Well, yes. We are not really confused about that. What is confusing is how God's love can cover them. When Peter says that love covers our sins, he is not saying that we should hide the sins, but that love embraces a person, even the sinful parts.

We tend to divide our lives between the asset and liability columns, the righteous parts and the sinful parts. And we work so hard to turn our liabilities into assets, hoping to be more lovable. But by grace, God loves all of you and not just your lovable qualities. He loves the parts that you don't even love, for his love embraces your multitude of sins. That is the only way you can receive the gift of community. You don't have time to find a better group of people to love. The end of all things is near. Your calling is to love the people you have. Love the family you have, the friends you have, the church, and even the nation with its multitude of sins.

The Barnes family includes a Golden Retriever named Luther who is dearly loved, but who is frankly the weakest link. He is just as dumb as dirt. But we aren't about to say goodbye to him because we just love him. I have always been amazed at how easy it is for people to love their pets, and how hard it is for us to love each other. I'm thinking it's because dogs can't talk. So they can't hurt us. But that is easy love. Cheap love. Real love has to cover a multitude of sins.

How do we manifest this love? Notice, not only does Peter not tell us we have to like the people we love, but he doesn't even ask us to feel loving toward each other. The Bible never describes love as a feeling, but always as a way of serving others. "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you have received."

Now we are ready to talk about the way you have been uniquely gifted by God to serve. Some of you are gifted to work with numbers

and computers, and others to manage people and take leadership. Some are gifted to speak and write words eloquently, and others communicate through music or visual arts. Some work well under stressful conditions, and others are gifted to spend a long time in quiet places. Some are gifted at spending time with children and teenagers, and others of us aren't. After Youth Sunday, our Director of Administration said that if we asked him to work with kids for a day, he would end up in jail. He has different gifts that are just as vital to us.

The point Peter is making to us today is that there may be a variety of gifts but all of them are given for the purpose of serving the community in the day you have. You can never, ever value your gifts for their instrumental function, and certainly not for their egotistical function. You can only value them for their communal function. You can't even think of them as belonging to you. They are gifts for serving the people God has given you to love. So your gifts actually belong to the Body of Christ. And if you don't use them for the community, you are stealing from Christ.

Our gifts are the means by which we experience the gracious love of God among us. Listen as Peter continues, "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God. Whoever serves must do so with the strength God supplies." How do the people around you hear the word of God? In your words. How do they find the enduring strength of God? In your service. Your gifts have an almost sacramental function because they are tangible ways for others to experience grace.

The purpose of all gifts, according to Peter, is "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ." In just religious things? No, in all things. In just things we do at the church? No, in all things. In just really important things? No, the call is to glorify God in all things. All things are created by God, and thus all things have the capacity to glorify their Creator when they do what they are designed to do.

You know how people sometimes say, "Oh he is so gifted" or "Oh she has such wonderful gifts." If no one is saying that about you, it only means they aren't paying attention. All things in God's creation are gifted to glorify him. How does a squirrel glorify God? By looking at the elephant and saying, "There goes a big gift!" No, the squirrel glorifies God by running around trees and swiping bird food. It doesn't matter if you are Leonard Slatkin at the Kennedy Center conducting Mahler or Rosie at the Diner conducting a pot of coffee, God has gifted you to serve others. You discern that gift not by looking at others and applying for their gifts, but by looking at God's unique creation of your own life.

It is interesting that Peter begins this passage by talking about the end of all things being near, and concludes the passage by affirming the glory of God in all things. I think that means that as we take seriously the questionable nature of the future, and as we receive the gift of the day we have, we can choose to be a glorious gift of God in all the things that make up the life we have today. So you are not called just to use your gifts, but to be a gift. Be God's gift to the people you find in the course of a day: in a committee meeting or in a minivan, in the office or in the grocery store, in the places of conflict or the places of delight. Not only are the people around you God's gift to you, but so are you God's gift to them, today.

The Jewish Philosopher Abraham Heschel has written about "the hesitation before birth." Some people, he says, can waste all their days, hesitating, waiting for life to begin at the next stage. Nothing gives less glory to God. How does a mother or father glorify God? Not by dreaming of what they will do when their children leave home, but by cherishing their children while they have them. And not by focusing their love only on their children, but by glorifying God in all the other things for which they have also been gifted. How does a disgruntled employee glorify God? Not by dreaming of the next job, but by asking if all their speech at work could be perceived as the words of God.

Tomorrow, if it comes, will bring its own calling and new opportunities to use God's gifts. Today's calling is enough to fill our hearts.

By your Holy Spirit, O God, open our eyes to the amazing gifts we have received: the gift of today, the gift of a people to love, and the gift of having a means of serving them in all things. Amen.