

Big Gifts
August 29, 2010
Grace Chapel, Bear Creek

Scripture readings: 2 Samuel 23:14-17 Mark 14: 3-9

Late in the Book of Samuel, after most the story of David has been told, there is a short section, sort of an appendix to the main story, that describes the deeds of David's "Mighty men of valor." These are the heroes who shared in his fighting and performed great deeds. Three are singled out for particular praise: Joshebbasshebeth, Eleazar, and Shammah. In 2 Samuel 23: 8-12 we can read of instances when they each stood alone or with just a few others, and accomplished amazing feats on the battlefield against the Philistines. If they had action comics in those days, these would be the guys featured! "David and his Mighty Men of Valor!" Bam! Pow! You can picture it maybe. But among these tales of heroic combat is a different kind of story, which I will read for us.

2 Samuel 23: 14-17

14 David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. 15 David said longingly, "O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!" 16 Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, 17 for he said, "The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it. The three warriors did these things. (NRSV)

From the New testament, from the Gospel of Mark, we read of another gift:

Mark 14: 3-9: 3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." (NRSV)

The word "gift" has come to mean many things. The simplest definition concerns what one person may give to another without expecting payment. We as Christians also use the word for things that we consider gifts from God. These include talents, often called "gifts." Or sometimes we see in circumstances and events "gifts" from God. But today, I'm focusing on the simpler meaning of a gift: something someone gives or does for another. Particularly what I will call "Big" gifts.

Big gifts. What we have just read of in these scripture passages, in both of these cases, are big gifts. Gifts that astound. Gifts that are unexpected. Have you ever received a big gift? A gift that left you amazed and astounded? Think about it.

We are more used to smaller things, that may be big in their own way, but of more expected scale. Perhaps gifts we receive at Christmas, or on our birthdays. A friend treats us for lunch, or gives us tickets to a show. Have we not each received all manner of generous gifts from others? We usually try to reciprocate. At our best, we take these gifts as signs of God's love seen in the other person, and we then in turn give to others, as signs of God's love exercised through us.

But, what about those big gifts? I remember, as a child, wishing for big gifts for Christmas. Really big gifts. A real airplane that I'd be able to fly, for example. A completely unrealistic wish, of course, but that's maybe what would have made it such a "big" gift. A pony maybe. Did you ever wish for a pony when you were young? My family lived in a small house in a Maryland subdivision near DC at the time. A pony wasn't a whole lot more realistic. Have you wished for big gifts sometimes? Only to realize that you were just daydreaming, perhaps. It doesn't have to be material things, either. There is a young woman I know, who loves to travel. She really wished she could spend a year overseas in Germany. When she had nearly finished in high school, I heard her say that she wished some philanthropist, someone with money, would generously fund her for a year abroad. Yes, that would indeed have been a big gift.

Perhaps the best way we can think of a "Big" gift, in the sense I'm talking about, is a gift so big that reciprocating in a meaningful sense is out of the question. If we are cynical about human nature, we might not believe in "big" gifts. We would assume that every "gift" has its price tag of expected reciprocation. Here's an example that has a rich history: Gifts to a child can't be readily reciprocated. A child doesn't have the resources to reciprocate for gifts received. So gifts to a child would be "big" gifts. But suppose the child, receiving the gifts of attention and upbringing, is expected to reciprocate by providing support and care for his or her parents when that child grows up. Then the care the child receives isn't such a big gift, is it?

It becomes a social transaction. It's no longer a gift in the sense of something given with no expectation of return. Indeed, this has been the reason to have children for much of the world's history. That's been true in this country, even to our day. And, what about the young woman who hoped to receive a stipend to spend a year in Europe? Would the gentleman making the gift want something in return? Do we really believe that truly big gifts can happen?

Let's take a look at these two cases from the Bible. In the story of David, he and his men are holed up in a stronghold, identified in an earlier verse as a cave. Meanwhile, nearby, a Philistine military unit holds the town of Bethlehem. You may recall that Bethlehem is David's home town. David and his men must rely on what stale food and water they have in the cave. David longs for the fresh, clean water from the well at

Bethlehem. He is indiscrete enough to say so aloud. Three of his men hear him. At the risk of their own lives, they sneak through the Philistine garrison and bring back water from the well at Bethlehem for David.

Consider: What makes this a big gift? Is well water from Bethlehem that much better than the water at hand? Will David be healthier or live longer if he drinks it? If you happen to visit the Holy Land, is water from that well in Bethlehem the most valuable thing you can bring back? No.

The closest thing I have witnessed to this gift is a jar of water from the Jordan River that my grandparents brought back from their visit to the Holy land in 1956. My grandfather was a pastor and Presbyterian missionary. He expected to use this water from the Jordan River for baptisms after he returned to the United States. It was in a Mason jar, about a pint I'd guess, and the water was, frankly, a bit dirty. As a child of perhaps 10 or so, I wasn't impressed. Later, as an adult, I saw slides of how my grandparents went out in a small, rather rickety looking boat into the Jordan river to recover that pint of water. I was aware by then of the history of the Israelites, and all of the occasions when the Jordan River was important. There was the crossing into the Promised Land. There's the Baptism of Jesus. And other occasions. Only later, as an adult, could I appreciate the importance of that water.

So, as we read this story, we understand: It's not the water itself. It's the risks that these three men took, out of their love and faithfulness to David, that made this a big gift. It is a gift purchased at enormous risk, risk of their very lives.

It's important to note that David recognizes this as a big gift. Someone else may have considered this to simply be a case of, "My wish is your command." Think of a person in an elevated position of authority. Say, a king. A king might well say, "My wish is your command." In that case, the acquisition of water is expected. It becomes a duty of those who hear the wish, or anticipate the wish, rather than a gift. We need to be careful not to adopt this model ourselves. Do we expect those around us, perhaps those who love us, to satisfy our wishes? Do we demand that they satisfy our wishes? If so, we have transformed an opportunity to receive a gift, perhaps even a big gift, into an exercise of authority. It is our loss. Instead of being thankful, we are merely satisfied with the gift. And if we don't receive the fulfillment of our wish, we are disappointed and maybe even angry.

David doesn't do that. He is surprised. He recognizes that what these three have done is render, to him, a big gift. A gift which expresses their love and devotion to him. A gift which lifts him up in spirit. A gift which tells David that, with the loyalty of such men, he will conquer the Philistines. And go on to be the great King of Israel. It's not the water that makes the gift great. It's the love that it expresses.

Look at what David does with the gift. He says, "The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" He pours out the water, as a gift to God.

Now, at this, a materialist would be outraged. Here is this water, which was procured at great risk. And it is simply wasted! But, David, in his wisdom, recognizes what needs to be done. He is not refusing the gift. He is, in turn, giving this great gift to God. He receives love, and he renders love. In doing so he honors these three men more than if he had drunk it, or returned it to them to drink. In the end, David is blessed. These three warriors are blessed. Through them and their subsequent deeds, Israel is blessed. And, through David's descendants, and these stories, we are blessed today.

David also did not treat this gift as an obligation to be traded for favors or other consideration. A cynical David would have figured that these three were angling for posts as Minister of Trade, or Secretary of State, or a pleasant posting as ambassador to Egypt. But, no, that's not what this is about. This gift of love, this gift of sacrifice, cannot be reciprocated. It is too big. David, in humility, gives thanks, and offers it to God.

Finally, notice that David accepts the gift graciously. He does not scold the men for needlessly risking their lives. It is too late for that. His actions show that he is honored by, and appreciates, this gift. The men's risk of their lives is not wasted.

Now let's turn to the case when Jesus, too, receives a big gift. Now, keep in mind that Jesus knows about big gifts. He has healed lepers, the blind, and even raised Lazarus. Earlier in Mark we can read of how he raised the daughter of Jarius, the Leader of the synagogue, from the dead. What gift can be greater than these? There is no way that the gift of life, and the gift of health, can be reciprocated in the way that we often do to satisfy social obligations.

What is different here is that it is Jesus who is receiving the gift. That does not happen often. It would seem to be a surprise. We read in the Gospel of Mark, "A woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head." In the very similar story in John, the ointment is poured over Jesus's feet, and the woman, identified as Mary, then wipes his feet with her hair. The value of the ointment is identified as being more than 300 denarii, that is, about a year's worth of wages for a laborer. That is indeed a huge sum.

In this case, the materialist view is explicit. In David's case, we wonder whether the risk was worthwhile for water that David just pours out to God. But here we read, "Some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her."

I believe that we can understand this concern for the efficient use of material resources. It's very much a part of our culture today, just as it was in Jesus's day. We like to get something tangible for our money. When we give, we want to get the greatest benefit for our dollar. We don't like waste.

Jesus does not join with the critics. After all, what would be the point? The gift was already given. That pure nard ointment, which was so precious, is now expended. It can't be put back in the jar. (And even if it could be, I doubt there was much of a market for used ointment.)

More important, Jesus accepts the gift for what it is, an expression of love. A love that does not think of the price. A love that does not seek to hold back, or conserve assets, or to be efficient. A love that is totally focused on the recipient.

Jesus understands. For, you see, Jesus is preparing, himself, to give the biggest gift of all. As he tells his disciples, as reported in the words of John, 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

We as Christians understand Jesus to be God, in human form, born into this world to live and experience the suffering and aches of humanity, as the expression of God's great love for us. We all know John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (KJV) This is God's gift to us. It is a "big" gift. It is a gift that we cannot reciprocate. We cannot pay it back. We cannot "deserve" it in any practical sense. What does one do as a recipient of such a gift?

David gives us an example. Give thanks. Accept the gift, and recognize it as a demonstration of God's love for us. Let us pour out our thanks to God. And, strengthened in that love, and confident in God's support, let us live our lives so that we, like David, bring God's blessings to others.

Jesus also gives us an example. Forget the materialist view. Don't worry about hoarding or being efficient with God's love. There is plenty for everybody. The more we pour out that love in our actions to others, the more God will bless us. And those others. For, ultimately, it is the love of God which stays with us. The material will pass away. Our fragile, transient lives on this earth will end. What will remain? The love and good we have done for others, for God's sake. And God's love, through those others, through generations to come. Ultimately, our names may be forgotten here on earth, and all those material things will disappear. But we will endure in God's love.

Notice what is remembered in today's scripture. These three men of valor brought a precious gift of water to David. A woman, identified as Mary, poured out a jar of precious ointment on Jesus. God's love is poured out through these, and ultimately through Jesus, for our sake. So also are we to do for others. So that when we leave this world, and are forgotten, and all our material assets dispersed, yet we will live, with God, as his children, forever.

Amen.