



You Have a Gift! The Gifts of Deeds

1 Peter 4:7-11

September 18, 2005

The first words of this scriptures reads, “The end of all things is near.” Now, I don’t know when the end of all things is coming, but the closest I’ve come to seeing the end of all things was when I saw the beach of the Gulf Coast, when I saw how the hurricane had scoured every human habitation off that beach for hundreds of yards inland. It was not the end of all things, but it was definitely the end of many things for the people of those communities.

When life as you know it comes to an abrupt end, how do you handle it? Look back at verse seven: “The end of all things is near; THEREFORE be serious and discipline yourselves...” The letter goes on to hold up two key disciplines to be serious about in times like these: the disciplines of love and hospitality. If you are facing a disastrous time of endings, whether it’s a national disaster, or a personal disaster, the disciplines of love and hospitality are what are called for. When it seems like all things around you are coming to an end, above all hold fast to love and to hospitality.

Now, how do you do that? You do that *by being good stewards of the manifold grace of God*. By the grace of God, you and I are granted spiritual powers, gifts, so that when some things end, and loss strikes us low, we can serve one another with love and hospitality. The letter then specifies two ways that service can happen. It can happen when somebody speaks, and it can happen when somebody acts.

“WHOEVER SPEAKS MUST DO SO AS ONE SPEAKING THE VERY WORDS OF GOD.” (v. 11)

In stressful, crucial times of loss, God gives to some of God’s children the gift of speech. And when they employ that gift of speech, their words unleash the healing powers of love and hospitality. Words matter. There is nothing like hearing the right word you need at the time you need it. It can happen for a whole nation, as it did when Lincoln rode a train to Gettysburg, scribbling a few words on the back of an envelope. When he stood over the fresh graves of thousands of Union and Confederate dead and gave those words to a suffering nation who sons had given “the last full measure of devotion,” those words began the healing of a nation. They were the right words at the right time.

Words matter to individuals as well as nations. When my father died, my family asked my friend Nancy Osborne to give the funeral message. Some of you here still remember the power of her words, for she was gifted with the right word for that time.

So she began with the words from a parable of Jesus, “There was a man who built a house...” and she spoke of how my father, who had built many homes, had built his life. The Holy Spirit had given her the gift of speech, and her words still comfort me.

This past week in Gulfport, we saw how God had gifted Joe Newton’s brother Ed with the gift of that kind of healing speech. And as Ed employed that gift, it not only comforted many hurricane victims, it comforted us recovery workers too. But this letter does not stop with the gift of speech, it goes on to the gift of service, that is, the gift of deeds...

WHOEVER SERVES MUST DO SO WITH THE STRENGTH THAT GOD SUPPLIES
... (v. 11)

Too many times the church stops with the gift of speech and goes no further. We give the impression that the verbal gifts of the pastor and teacher and evangelist and prophet are the only ones that really count in church. So much of what church does is so verbal. The result is that many gifts are forced underground to operate in secular situations almost exclusively because of the church’s ignorance or disinterest. (Charles Bryant, Rediscovering Our Spiritual Gifts, p. 116) The result is that too many men and women get the impression that there is no place in church for them to put their non-verbal gift at work.

But this Scripture calls out all of God’s gifts: whoever speaks must do so, yes. But also whoever serves with the gifts of deeds must do so too, and do it with the strength that God supplies. The genius of Baptist Disaster Recovery is the way it unleashes the non-verbal spiritual gifts of men and women in the pews. In an all-verbal church there are few places they can contribute. But in a serving church of deeds, watch out! This week in Meridian and Gulfport it was a sight to behold how men and women put God’s gifts of active service to work. They did so with all of their strength. Actually they did so beyond their own strength, as they became channels of the strength that God supplies.

What does the Bible mean by gifts of service? They are more than natural abilities. They are more than acquired skills. The spiritual gifts of service are gifts like *giving* and *compassion* and *faith* and *assisting* and *leadership*. These are examples the New Testament gives of the spiritual gifts of deeds. This week in Gulfport I saw people put those gifts to work.

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES...

I saw people put the gift of GIVING to work. Now all Christians practice the spiritual discipline of giving. But some Christians are especially gifted for giving. They don’t necessarily have more money than other Christ-followers. But somehow when they give, they give with a “special measure and delight to further God’s work in the world.” (Patricia Brown, Spirit Gifts, p. 39) Many of you gave “a special measure” to help the recovery team

go to Mississippi. On Wednesday night there, we held a devotional time at the church where we stayed. One of the prayer concerns that night was for Courtney, who had lost her home, and had also lost the money she needed to go to school. A few moments later, one man took her hand and placed a very generous personal gift in her hand. A gift, “with a special measure and delight,” so she could go to school.

I saw Baptist men and women put the spiritual gift of COMPASSION to work. Compassion, or mercy, is the ability to stand in another one’s shoes and then act in some way to help that one keep going the way God wants that one to go. This past week, when Esther and Jack Jones came into a family’s flooded house, they could say, “I know what it is like to be in your shoes. Six years ago our home was flooded too.” And then Jack and Esther and the rest of us started the same mud-out procedures that Jack and Esther had learned in their home.

I saw believers put the spiritual power of FAITH to work. Faith is the ability daily to see God’s will, and then to have the confidence to do it. Faith, says Patricia Brown, “is living one day at a time even when life seems out of control. To live fully in faith is to live each day as best you can . . . and to trust the rest to God.” (*Spirit Gifts*, p. 40) The toughest job we had was a mud-out of a home full of debris. Honestly, there were moments when we were not sure we could get it done. But among us there were people who had faith that, by the strength that God supplies, we could move a small mountain of debris and mud and spoiled furniture and food out of that house. And we did. And when we were done, the mountain of debris on the street was equal to the size of the house. Faith, to move mountains.

I saw men and women put the spiritual gift of LEADERSHIP to work. Leadership is not controlling and domineering, but rather leadership is the ability to share information and power to help people accomplish their goals, i.e., to help people “git ‘er done!” Our team was blessed by the steady leadership of Vanise and Tom, who always kept a step ahead of us and kept us focused on the work at hand. Actually, each person on the team stepped up to lead whenever the situation called for him or her lead with his or her gift.

These are a few examples of how I witnessed men and women of God putting their spiritual gifts of service to work this week. But let me assure you, you don’t have to go to Mississippi to put your gift to work. Everyday life in Wilson cries out for all of us to put our gifts to work right here. In this congregation, God has gifted many people with the gifts of giving and compassion and faith and assisting and leadership. In this city, there are plenty of people who have been laid low by personal disasters.

GLORY BE!

When it seems like the end of the world for someone you know, look deep within yourself, and see if God has not given you some spiritual gift that you can use to help them. When you do, you will be showing love and hospitality to that someone. And more, you will also be glorifying God: “whoever serves must do so with the strength that

God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things...” Now that is a daring thought, that something we do in our little lives might glorify God: (v. 11) How could we ever give glory to the One who is the source of glory? It works like this: *when the gifts that come from God are returned to God through service, then God is glorified.* The circle of grace is then complete. When that circle is unbroken, when we pass on what we’ve been given, then we know the joy of doing what we were created to do, and then God knows the joy of seeing us turn out to be the children God created us to be. From grace to grace! From glory to glory!

-- Douglas E. Murray