



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

15th Sunday after Pentecost: September 2, 2018

Sermon Title: “Implanted”

Sermon Text: James 1:17-22, 27

Everybody loves to receive gifts. Birthday gifts, Christmas gifts, housewarming gifts, retirement gifts, and just-because-I-missed you gifts. It’s fun to *receive* a gift. But it’s just as wonderful to *give* a gift. It’s a priceless feeling when you’re able to pick out the perfect gift for someone, and then see the delight in their eyes as they gratefully receive it.

Our reading today from the Book of James acknowledges the inherent joy of *giving* gifts and *receiving* gifts by observing that: “every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” This means that God is the ultimate giver of gifts, and it is God’s generosity that inspires and moves us to respond by giving gifts to others.

Of course, not all gifts stick with us throughout our lives. We can all think of gifts we desperately wanted to receive as children but then, a few days or weeks later, cast aside when we’ve lost interest. My mother always used to say that my brother and I had more fun with the box our toys came in than the toys themselves! But even gifts we enjoy often fade in importance for us. I’ve recently been selling off some of my old toys on eBay. I felt no regret when my vintage 1969 Space Boots sold at auction. I would’ve gladly *paid* someone just to take them off my hands.

But other gifts we receive are timeless, eternal, and even life changing. These are the “perfect gifts from above” that God provides to us. These gifts not only enrich *our* lives, but are capable of enriching the lives of *others*. That’s what James means when he refers to God’s gifts as “first fruits.” It means that God’s gifts are consecrated and made holy so we who receive those gifts can use them to bring holiness to those around us. Simply stated, God blesses us with gifts so that we can bless our neighbor.

The ultimate gift from God is of course Jesus Christ. In Jesus we’ve been given the gifts of forgiveness, love, and eternal life. Jesus is a gift poured out from God’s own heart – a gift that draws us into a relationship of mystical depth with God, and then into relationship with all of creation.

That’s how God’s gifts work. They always draw us into relationships. And so they reach their highest and greatest good when shared. What good is the perfect homerun swing if it can’t be seen and celebrated with a crowd of fans? What good is a gorgeous painting, if it’s never displayed? And of what use is a magnificent book that’s never published?

Here in worship, we're surrounded by people who've received astonishing gifts from God and who've used them to *glorify God* and *bless us*. Musicians... Lectors... Worship assistants... You're all a blessing to us. You've developed, used, and shared your gifts faithfully and wisely. And in doing so, your relationships with God and with God's people have been strengthened. Similarly, God gave all of us gifts to use *outside* of church to bless and serve others. Teachers, engineers, meteorologists, mechanics, athletes, secretaries, custodians, doctors, nurses, parents; *everyone* has received "gifts from above" – gifts from God. Thank you for sharing those gifts. As you do, you bless so many people. Your very life is an offering of faith and a means of glorifying God.

Of course over time our gifts can fade. Our mobility becomes limited. Our eyesight dims. Our dexterity declines. Endurance evaporates. But as old gifts fade, new gifts take their place. With age comes fresh gifts of wisdom, hospitality, empathy, listening, and love. Those gifts are "from above" too, and are most faithfully and beautifully used when shared.

There are a few of God's gifts that are, to use the word James uses, "implanted." These are gifts that are so precious to us that God deeply roots them in our souls so that they can never be lost. These are the gifts that, even in our times of greatest loneliness or weakness, bloom at just the right time to remind us that God is with us and we are eternally loved.

To illustrate what I mean, allow me to share a story about a woman named Miriam. She died a few years ago. I met her long ago, during my second year of seminary. At the time, Miriam was close to ninety years old and lived in a small rural nursing home. Aside from the nurses, her only visitors were her family members and me, the seminarian who tended the little country church in Lineboro, Maryland where she spent most of her life and raised her children. Declining health had prevented Miriam from attending church for many years. I had the privilege of visiting her every month to bring the Lord's Supper to her and to serve as a living reminder of her continuing connection to her parish and to God.

Every time I visited, Miriam struggled to remember who I was, where I came from, and why I was there. And during most of the visit, I had to shout because Miriam had difficulty hearing me. Her hands were shaky, her eyesight poor, and she often got confused.

But whenever it came time for us to pray the Lord's Prayer together, a transformation came over Miriam. It was as stunning as it was heartwarming. The voice that was usually shaky and weak suddenly became strong and confident. Her posture straightened and she took on a new vibrancy as in word-perfect fashion she joined me in that ancient, holy prayer. For a moment, she became as young as her faith was strong. In her winter years, Miriam had forgotten many things. But she retained her hold upon the Lord's Prayer. I suppose a scientist could provide a medical explanation for all of this, but to me it was simply a grace from God, a testimony of Christ's presence, and an implanted gift that would bloom to the very end, a gift that assured Miriam that she was saved, she was loved, and that she could never be separated from her Lord.

How are God's perfect, implanted gifts blooming in *you*? How are they assuring you of God's love, sustaining you with hope, and equipping you to bless others? The answer will be

different for each and every one of us. God's perfect, implanted gift in you might call you to service within our congregation. It might just as likely call you to be the hands and legs of Jesus *outside* of Sunday worship.

Maybe you're struggling to figure out what your perfect gift is, and where and how God is calling you to bless and serve others. If that's the case, keep praying and discerning. Others might see your gift before you do, so keep an open ear to what your friends are saying, and make sure you tell them about the gifts you see in *them* too.

As all of God's gifts are gradually revealed in our lives, God calls us to tend and nurture them. James suggests a few habits that might help: be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Live with a spirit of humility and be oriented *outward*, toward our brothers and sisters in the world, and not *inward*, upon our own needs and wants. Be doers of the word, not merely hearers; and always remember your truest identity: You are God's beloved sons and daughters, the treasured people of the Lord.

God's gifts in *us* and in our *neighbors* are nothing less than glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth, and constitute ongoing, hopeful assurance to us of God's presence and unending love. May our eyes be opened to God's glorious implanted gifts, and may we welcome, and tend, and share those gifts with humility and joy every minute of our lives, to the glory of God, and the blessing of our neighbors. Amen.