

“WHAT DO I HAVE IN MY HAND?”

Scripture Reading: Acts 3:1-10

Both Dee and I have reached the age when we have memory problems so we went to the doctor to see if she could help. After a thorough check-up she assured us that we were both physically okay, but she also suggested that we might want to start writing things down to help us remember.

So the other night we were watching TV and I got up and Dee asked, “*Where are you going?*” “*To the kitchen,*” I said.

“*Could you get me a bowl of ice cream?*” she asked. “*Sure,*” I said.

“*Don’t you want to write this down to remind you?*” she asked. “*No, I can remember a bowl of ice cream,*” I said.

“*Oh, and could you put it strawberries on top?*” she asked. “*You got it,*” I said.

“*Now you should write it down,*” she said. “*Ice cream with strawberries, I can remember that,*” I said.

“*And whipped cream,*” she added. “*Okay,*” I said.

Twenty minutes later I came back from the kitchen and handed Dee a plate with eggs and bacon. She stared at the plate a minute and then said, “*You forgot my toast!*”

That was a leftover from last Sunday’s Holy Humor Service. But it also serves as a confession: I’m becoming an Old-Timer. And I’m going to ask you to enter the Old-Timer zone this morning to memorize a Bible Verse in the King James Version.

Here’s the context for the verse: Peter and John are on their way home from the day of Pentecost but first stop off at the temple to pray. There they come across a beggar, a lame man, a man who has been lame all his life and probably spent most of his life begging right there by the so-called Beautiful gate, asking for money. He lifts up his eyes to Peter and John and holds out his right hand, empty palm open. And Peter responds with words I want us all to consider this morning.

Here’s the King James Version:

“*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee...*”

“*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee...*”

With those words Peter figuratively pulls out his empty pockets to display his poverty for all to see. These were poor folks, these Apostles, fishers and farmers mostly. They relied for their financial means on the few that had some: on Johanna, the wife of King Herod’s steward who many think was the primary financial angel for Jesus’ ministry; on Joseph of Arimathea who, we are told, had enough means to own a private burial plot and gave it over to house Jesus’ crucified body (though, as it turned out, only temporarily).

“*Silver and gold have I none,*” that was a more accurate depiction of the vast majority of those early followers. Say those words with me because they probably are an accurate depiction of you too: *Silver and gold have I none.*

One more time: *Silver and gold have I none.*

Imagine the disappointment of the beggar when he hears those words. No food tonight, he might have thought. Maybe his family relied on him for the money he brought in. Maybe they’d go hungry

too. Imagine his disappointment in being let down by these so-called holy men. They've got nothing. **Nothing**. Or do they?

You see, Peter doesn't stop there. He goes on to say "... *but such as I have, I give thee.*"

Say that with me: "*But such as I have, I give thee.*"

Again: "*But such as I have, I give thee.*"

Now say them both together: "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee.*"

One more time: "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee.*"

And that's what set them apart, these Apostles, these early Christians, both what they DID have and their willingness to share it with others.

Just about the first thing they did after Pentecost was to share their faith with others and their finances with each other. They gave special concern for the poor and needy, the widows and orphans. They were willing to give from the little they had.

Even more importantly, they understood that primarily what they had was not money; it was faith, it was Spirit. And that's what they shared.

Say it with me again: "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee.*"

Peter showed his empty pockets, opened up his empty hand and, invoking the name and Spirit of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the lame man stood up and walked.

"*Show me the money,*" the lame man demanded. "*I can't,*" said Peter. "*Instead, let me show you the miracle.*"

Several years ago I was part of a United Church of Christ delegation sent down to Haiti to meet with our mission partners there, CONASPEH, the National Spiritual Council of Churches of Haiti. Others in the group had some special training: a nurse, a physician, and one man who worked as a financial advisor in a bank. Each of us came to Haiti offering what we had. I preached and led worship there, the doctor and nurse held free clinics, and the banker held a meeting with a local church treasurer in Haiti to give him advice on the use of their financial resources.

"*How much is your average monthly offering?*" he asked him. Through an interpreter, the treasurer responded, "*Twenty-five dollars.*" "*No, you don't understand,*" the banker said. "*Not how much do YOU give. How much in total does the church receive from EVERYBODY in a month?*" The treasurer replied, "*Twenty-five dollars.*" "*Oh,*" the banker said and turned away.

The next day we went to worship at that twenty-five dollar church. The ramshackle building was filled to overflowing, there were nearly a dozen musicians making up the impromptu band that led the worship. Kids came flowing out of the chairs when I called them forward, running and jumping down the makeshift aisles. There were tears and laughter, music and embracing – there was Spirit! And I envied them. I envied that twenty-five dollar church.

Say our memory verse with me again: "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee.*" Our brothers and sisters in Haiti taught us the same lesson Peter taught that lame man: the most precious gift of the church is the Spirit; it's not the money, it's the MIRACLE! That's what we have to give, you and I.

Just a year or two into my ministry here, an older member of our church called and wanted to talk with me. I'm not going to use her name, though she gave me permission to tell this story. She wanted to meet me in my office even though I know traveling was difficult for her and I was more

than willing to come to her. No, she said. She was coming to my office. She wanted to ask me a question.

It was a week between her call and her scheduled visit and several times over that week it nagged at me – what was her question? Did it have to do with budget issues? Was it something new we had tried in worship? Was I in trouble for something I said in a sermon?

She was helped into my office by a relative and sat down heavily in one of my office chairs. After asking her relative to leave, she said to me, *“I’m over ninety years old and not in very good health. “Something happened to me a few weeks ago that I have to ask you about.”*

She continued, *“I was at home and sitting in my chair when, all of a sudden, Jesus appeared to me. He was right there, in the room, dressed all in white. I wasn’t sleeping. This wasn’t a dream. It was Jesus. He looked at me and, without speaking a word, he slowly raised his right hand and held it out to me, but his hand was cupped. I couldn’t see what he was offering me.”* Looking me in the eye, she said, *“Now, here’s my question: What was in Jesus’ hand?”*

What was in Jesus’ hand? How would you have answered her question?

Well, I did the clergy thing and stammered out some words that both hid and betrayed my ignorance. The fact is, I had nothing to say. I was in awe. You see, I believed her. I believe this really happened to her. Finally, I said the thing I should have said to begin with. I said, *“What do YOU think was in Jesus’ hand?”*

We talked about the kind of things that one might hold in a cupped hand – money, food, and, finally, she thought, water. Do you think it might be water that was in Jesus’ hand? And I thought of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the Samaritan well and him telling her about the *“living water”* and her saying, *“Show me this water,”* and Jesus saying, *“It’s me. I’m the living water, the living water of eternal life.”* And that’s what this saint of our church concluded was in Jesus’ hand. Living water. Eternal Life. It was a gift she would receive just a few months after our visit.

Let’s say our memory verse one more time:

“Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee.”

This is what Jesus has given us, living water, eternal life, the undying Spirit of Christ. This is what we have. This is what we are called to share.

It’s not the money. It’s the miracle.

That’s the most important thing we have to share as we extend a hand to one another, to our church, to our community, to our world. That’s the precious gift that Jesus has given us that we, like the early Apostles, are called to give to others.

And maybe it’s only when the money is tight, maybe it’s only when our pockets are empty that we truly offer what we have. We offer our hand to another, and the hand is cupped. What is in that hand?

It’s a miracle.

Amen.