

**St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church  
Curtis Baggett's Sermon for Epiphany 3  
January 24, 2010**

**Scriptures: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; I Corinthians 12:12-31a; and Luke 4: 14-21.**

This morning Paul has reminded us that each one of us has been given a gift --- a gift that weaves our lives into one another, filling the gaps between each of us, as not one of us has every gift and not one of us can fill all the needs around us. But it is the tapestry of gifts, the fabric of interconnectedness between God's people, that makes life rich and blessed every day.

Indeed, Paul's writing in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is almost a "feel good" reminder that God has invested Himself in each of us and bestowed upon us a special talent. Now it is our responsibility to discover and pursue that talent, then develop it in God's service to humankind and the earth we share together.

But how do we discover and pursue our talents? How do we experience this interwoven-ness amongst our fellow man? I suggest that we have seen at least one big answer to that question over the last two weeks as we have watched countless stories of pain and suffering in our neighboring country of Haiti. We have heard and seen so much, so much sensory overload, so much empathy has been felt, so much frustration about what can *I* do? And we have seen a multitude of reports where ordinary looking folks like you and me have given their time and efforts to boxing up goods, feeding the hungry, applying medical attention to wounds and breaks, picking at broken concrete and managing the dust and confusion, and maybe just carrying big boxes from one spot to another --- anything that can be construed as helping. Indeed, countless ordinary folks have shared their talents and gifts, no matter how small or insignificant, to help someone they did not even know. The tapestry of helpers has been nothing short of inspirational for us, and that doesn't mean that we are sitting here on our hands, not helping at all.

Some can doctor,  
some can drive ships and airplanes,  
some can lift and tote boxes,  
some can adopt children they haven't ever seen,  
some can write checks,  
some can pray.

Thank God for this connectedness we are watching every day!

It is in that same context that we read the Gospel of Luke this morning. Jesus goes to the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah. Listen again to what He reads to these eager souls and see if you are reminded of our very own St. Francis themes of finding the lost, healing the broken, and celebrating God's love for all. Listen again for the interwoven-ness of people with each other as they are encouraged to share their gifts and talents.

Here's what Luke says, [quote] Upon unrolling the scroll, Jesus declares that God has anointed Him to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, the healing of the blind, the freeing of those who are oppressed, AND the proclamation that the people have entered the year of the Lord's favor. [end quote] In other words, Jesus is declaring that the Kingdom of God is now at hand.

And here's the best part of all: Luke tells us that when Jesus finished, he gave the scroll back to the attendant, sat down, and realized that **THE EYES OF ALL IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE UPON HIM!!** Can you imagine the hush, the anticipation of what's next? I can just feel the tension among the listeners and the near panic in the young 30 year old Jesus, who has just declared war on the spiritual status quo.

There was no turning back now!! Without question, when Jesus launched His ministry, He sensed that **HIS** world had changed forever.

"The eyes of all in the synagogue were fastened upon Him," Luke tells us, and that brings us to this fundamental question --- a question for each one of us: **WHO ARE YOU LOOKING AT --- WHO ARE YOU FIXING YOUR EYES UPON AS YOU PATTERN YOUR LIFE?**

We all have heroes and heroines. We all have people we admire and look to for leadership and inspiration. Sometimes they are silent, but we all have those mentors in our lives --- men and women who lift our sights and provide encouragement to be more than what we would be on our own. Men and women who show us that we are less than perfect but that they see a gift in us, and that they believe in us, even when we don't fully believe in ourselves.

So who do **YOU** want to be like? Who has God used in your life to help you fix your eyes upon Jesus? Who have you looked to as a model for your attitude and your behavior? Perhaps it is someone who showed you about God's way to love. Or maybe it is someone who filled in the gaps of your talent bank and shared with you that it is ok to not have **EVERY** gift but that it is important to use the gifts we **HAVE** been given. Perhaps it is someone who challenged you to allow yourself to be changed by God's incredible love.

Christian author and teacher Tony Campolo tells the compelling true story of a young boy who kept his eyes on a model of behavior that was not perfect, but encouraging enough to make a difference in his life. Here's the story:

*Like most teachers, Mrs. Thompson looked at her fifth grade students and said that she would love them all the same, but deep in her heart she knew that was not true because right there in front of her in the first row of her classroom sat a slumping little boy named Teddy Stoddard. She had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were often messy and that he frequently needed a bath.*

*Because she was required by her principal to do so, she went to the school files and read Teddy's background reports. In the first grade, his teacher had written that Teddy was a bright child with a ready laugh, that he did his homework neatly and had good manners. In short, she wrote, he was a joy to be around.*

*His second grade teacher commented that Teddy was an excellent student, well like by his classmates, but that he seemed troubled because his mother had developed a terminal illness.*

*Predictably, his third grade teacher had written that Teddy's mother's death had obviously been hard on the boy, adding that Teddy's father didn't seem to show much interest.*

*By the fourth grade, his teacher was reporting that Teddy was withdrawn and didn't show much interest in school or friends. She added that he often slept through class.*

*By now, Mrs. Thompson realized that Teddy was struggling and needed someone to encourage him. Then too, she realized that she had failed this boy miserably, even though he had been difficult to love.*

*At Christmas time, her students brought her presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, EXCEPT FOR TEDDY'S. His present was clumsily wrapped in heavy brown paper that looked like it had originally been a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in front of the other children, trying to give Teddy any benefit of any doubt. Some of the children began to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing, and a bottle that was only a quarter full of perfume.*

*She stifled the children's laughter and exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, then dabbed some of the perfume on her wrist. Teddy stayed after school that day just long enough to say to her, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my Mom used to."*

*After Teddy left, she cried at her desk, and she determined that she would allow this moment to change her attitude and her spirit. She quit teaching reading and arithmetic and focused on teaching CHILDREN. She paid particular attention to Teddy from then on, and his bright mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded, and by the end of the year he had become one of the best performing students in her class.*

*A year later, Mrs. Thompson found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that she was the best teacher he had ever had.*

*Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school -- third in his class -- and that she was still the best teacher he'd ever had.*

*Four years after that, she got another letter, saying that it hadn't been easy but that he had stayed in school and that he was graduating from college with highest honors. And of course, he said also that she was still the best teacher he had ever had.*

*Then four more years passed and another letter came. This time he explained that now his name was a little longer, Theodore F. Stoddard, MD. But he didn't forget to tell her that she was still the best teacher he had ever had.*

*Then, later that spring, Mrs. Thompson received another letter from Teddy. This time he said he had met a girl and was going to be married. He said that his father had died a couple of years before and he was wondering if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit at the wedding in the place that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom.*

*Of course, she did just that! And of course, she wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing, AND she had saved just enough perfume to wear what Teddy remembered as the perfume his mother had worn on their last Christmas together.*

*They hugged each other at the wedding, and Dr. Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, for believing in me, for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."*

*Today, there is a wing at The Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines, appropriately named, The Stoddard Cancer Wing.*

*But there is an unexpected twist to this story. On the face of it, it is about Teddy Stoddard. But it's really about Mrs. Thompson, isn't it?*

*So rather than have us focus only on keeping our eyes fixed upon our models and Jesus as worthy mentors for our lives, it really is about reminding ourselves that . . .*

*SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, IS LOOKING AT YOU AND ME. SOMEONE IS WATCHING TO SEE HOW YOU AND I WILL RESPOND TO THE CRISIS IN HAITI. OR, A LITTLE CLOSER TO HOME, PERHAPS SOMEONE RIGHT IN YOUR OWN FAMILY IS WATCHING HOW YOU RESPOND TO THAT HOMELESS MAN HOLDING A SIGN ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, STRATEGICALLY PLACED AT THE STOP LIGHT SO YOU HAVE TO LOOK RIGHT AT HIM WITH THE KIDS SITTING IN YOUR CAR WITH YOU. SOMEONE IS PERHAPS DESPERATELY LONGING TO SEE IN YOU AND ME THAT WE ARE ENCOURAGERS, THAT WE CAN PUT OUR OWN EGOS ASIDE AND INVEST OURSELVES IN THE HEALING POWER OF PRAYER AND OUTREACH TO THE UNLOVELY.*

*SOMEONE WANTS TO SEE YOU AND ME USE OUR GIFTS TO FIND THE LOST, HEAL THE BROKEN, AND CELEBRATE GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE.*

