

## *To Rekindle the Gift*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON GALATIANS 1:11-24 AND LUKE 7:11-17

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*For I want you to know . . . that the gospel that was proclaimed by me was not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)*

**N**OTHING WORTH KNOWING CAN BE TAUGHT, Oscar Wilde once remarked. It must be discovered, stumbled upon, like treasure buried in a field (Matt. 13:44). It comes as gift, revelation, like the gospel came to Saint Paul. He did not learn it from earlier disciples; it came to him in its own peculiar, unique way, directly from the source, and it was important to him that people know that.

We might like to learn from other disciples, or from a book or a class, the things we want to know – things we *need* to know – about life: What is my purpose in life? How can I achieve my hope, fulfill my need? How can I be a better person, do more with my life? How can I continue to be energetic and productive in the face of future uncertainty and inevitable loss? These are only a few of the questions you shared with me in worship last month. There is no book or class, of course, where you can go for the answers.

Nor is there any book or class that will satisfy your greatest needs. Far and away the greatest number of you wrote in one way or another that your greatest need is your need for love, to give love and to receive love at home, in your neighborhood, at your workplace. You also expressed your need for peace; for health and wholeness; for security; for more time in your day; for a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with God. No book, not even the Bible, will meet those needs. No class, instructor, or college degree program can tell you with certainty what you must do to satisfy those needs.

The term the Bible uses for the answer to your most urgent question, the satisfaction of your greatest need, the fulfillment of your greatest hope, is “the kingdom of God.” And the good news, Jesus said, the gospel, is that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). It is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it (Gosp. Thomas 113). The response to your most urgent question, the satisfaction of your greatest need, the fulfillment of your greatest hope – all these things are spread out right in front of us.

Today I want to emphasize two things I believe about our hopes, needs, and questions – about the kingdom of God. First, we continue to have hopes, needs, and questions not because they remain unfulfilled but because they are the bond that connects us with God in the kingdom that is so near. Sufi poet Jelal al-Din Rumi wrote that the apparently unanswered longing we express *is* God's return message. "The grief you cry out from," he wrote, "draws you toward union. . . . Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection."<sup>1</sup>

Our unfulfilled hopes, our unmet needs, and our unanswered questions are not the darkness of emptiness or absence, they are the darkness of a womb that nurtures us toward new birth, new insight, in which we will see God face to face. They are the bridge between knowing in part and knowing fully (cf. 1 Cor. 13: 12). Our hopes, needs, and questions invite our special attention because *there* we will find the text, the curriculum, of our true education in what is worth knowing.

Second, I want to emphasize that as we work on our own education in things worth knowing, we complete the mission for which God has called us. Our mission as the church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."<sup>2</sup> Jesus did not call the first disciples, and does not call us, so we can have our own hopes fulfilled, our own needs met, our own questions answered. He did not even commission us to simply make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. He sent disciples into the world with a larger mission than that.

Jesus sent his first disciples – and he sends us – to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons," to give freely to others the fullness of new life we have freely received (Matt. 10:8). Raising the son of a widow at Nain was not a neat miracle peculiar to Jesus; it's what you and I are to do here today. As one of my colleagues wrote recently, God is looking "at all the brokenness [in the world], all the lives without meaning, all the busyness that keeps us from focusing, the constant activity that keeps us running but never seems to get us anywhere, looking at all the diabolic forces that tear apart what God intends to be together, looking at the walking dead stumble through their day on their dead-end walks to nowhere, and . . . God announces, 'I have heard the cry of my people . . . I will send you!'"<sup>3</sup> *God will send us!*

We carry within us the gift of new life that God makes to the world in love. The fulfillment of our hopes, the satisfaction of our needs, the resolution of our questions are in our hands more than we realize. And we are the messengers who carry those things to the world. Maybe our first priority, in the words of Paul to Timothy, is "to rekindle the gift of God that is within [us]" (2 Tim. 1:6).

NOTES: • 1. Jelal al-Din Rumi, "Love Dogs," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 155-56. • 2. *The Book of Discipline 2008*, ¶ 120. • 3. The Rev. Douglas Spencer, "A Centering Moment," 2 June 2010.