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God's Good Gifts
Matthew 7:7-12
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On Aug.26, 1985, a magazine titled *People Weekly* reported the true story of Manuel Garcia. Mr. Garcia was then 39 years old and living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He had stomach cancer, and was undergoing chemotherapy at the Milwaukee County Medical Complex. As often happens with chemo, Manuel lost all his hair! He was very embarrassed by his bald head, which added insult to the emotional and physical pain associated with stomach cancer! His older brother, Julio, his close relatives, and many of his friends were all frustrated that they could do nothing to help Manuel in his time of great need. How could they show him that they cared? How could they make his illness more bearable?

Finally, his relatives came up with a plan. They all shaved their heads, and went to visit Mr. Garcia in the hospital! Now, they all looked like Manuel! They showed him that bald is beautiful! They let him know that he was not alone! The following day, after being released from the hospital, Manuel discovered that over 100 of his friends and neighbors has also shaved their heads as a way of identifying with him in his suffering! He commented, "If a lot of people did for other cancer patients what my friends are doing for me, it would help." Thanks to his relatives and friends, Manuel Garcia was given the GIFTS OF HOPE< LOVE, AND A NEW LEASE ON LIFE!

Well, I hate to remind you of this, but in a way, we are all like Mr. Garcia! I don't mean that we are all bald, although some of us are well on the way to that glossy condition! What I mean is that we are all going to die, sooner or later! LIFE IS A TERMINAL CONDITION! As the Rev. Tony Campolo is fond of saying: Some day the undertaker is going to lower your body into the ground; they will throw dirt in your face; and then your family and friends will go back to the church to eat potato salad! How shall we cope with the knowledge that we are mortal?! How can we face illness, unemployment, aging, divorce, and all the other maladies that afflict us and those we love?! Can anyone console us in these losses?!

The Good News is that God has identified with us in our pain and frailty!

Our Father in heaven sent his own Son down to earth to STAND WITH US as we struggle with temptation and suffering! Jesus is EMMANUEL- GOD WITH US! Christ emptied himself of divinity so that he might experience hunger, illness, fear, loneliness, pain, and yes, even DEATH! We have a Savior who sympathizes with us, because he himself walked in our shoes! And although Christ is now in heaven, he has sent us the Holy Spirit to be our PARACLETE- from the Greek word for ONE WHO STANDS BESIDE ANOTHER TO GIVE ASSISTANCE! In 2 Cor.1:3-4, the Apostle Paul wrote: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that WE may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God"-RSV! The word used for "comfort" in that passage is the same Greek word that gave us "Paraclete." I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these two verses: "All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He COMES ALONG SIDE US when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings US alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can BE THERE for that person just as God was THERE FOR US."

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In our Scripture Lesson from Matthew ch.7, Jesus stated that same truth in a different way. Our Lord affirms here that our Heavenly Father desires to give GOOD GIFTS to us when we ask for help. Doesn't any HUMAN father want his child to be happy?! Doesn't any HUMAN mother want her child to be healthy, safe, and successful?! If WE, who are selfish and immature and finite in wisdom know how to seek nice gifts for our children, how much more does our Heavenly Father desire to give us the things necessary for our eternal salvation?! In Rom.6:23, St. Paul claims: "The WAGES of sin is DEATH, but the FREE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE through Christ Jesus." And in Ephesians ch.4, the Apostle reminds us that each of us has been given GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT that can be used to build up the Church and help any who are in need!

As I said a moment ago, one way to GIVE BACK TO GOD is by BEING THERE for another hurting person. Let me illustrate with another story. Several years ago, a school teacher was hired to tutor children in a large city hospital. The school system did not want these gravely-ill pupils to fall behind in their studies, so this teacher was assigned to help them during their recovery. One day, this teacher was asked to visit a boy who was newly-admitted to the hospital, but she was given only his name and room number. She was told that he had been studying nouns and adverbs in school before he was admitted for treatment. However, the tutor did not know about the child's condition until she got to his room, which was located in the burn unit of the hospital. She was not prepared to teach a boy who was horribly burned, in great pain, and suffering from depression! Somehow, she felt that teaching grammar to him was a cruel waste of his precious time and of her talent! She stumbled through the lesson, and dashed from the room as quickly as she could, feeling like a failure!

The next morning, a nurse from the burn unit stopped the tutor and asked, "What did you DO to that boy?!" The teacher tried to apologize for putting the child through such an ordeal, but the nurse interrupted her! "You don't understand," said the nurse. "We've been ver worried about the boy since he was admitted, but after your visit, his whole attitude has changed!" "He's fighting back, responding to treatment! It's as if he's decided to LIVE!" The lad later explained that he had completely given up hope until he met that tutor. Then he realized: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a DYING BOY< WOULD THEY?!" Just by BEING THERE, that teacher had given the child the courage to go on living!

It is no accident that I have used two stories about patients in a hospital. "Hospice," "hospital," and "hospitality" all come from a Latin noun meaning "GUEST." Let me briefly suggest 3 ways that you and I might treat people as our GUESTS. One way is to get involved with our mission trip to the Gulf Coast. Two years ago, the town of D'Iberville, Mississippi, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. We plan to send volunteers there next April to repair or rebuild homes. Ed Cake, the Associate Director of Volunteers, tells all volunteers: "The residents of D'Iberville...need you empathy, not your sympathy. They need your muscles and your caring heart, not your pity. They need to tell you their survival stories and you need to listen to those stories...Recognize that the healing of their spirits in the telling of their story is just as important as the physical labor that you will provide for them." Just the fact that Baptists from Connecticut

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care enough to help gives hope and healing to these homeless people! See Dave Colletta if you can make the trip, or help with planning here at home.

A second way to offer hospitality is by joining the Stephen Ministry, Our Congregational Care Committee is considering enrolling in this project in 2008. The brochure states: "The Stephen Series is a complete system for training and organizing lay people to provide one-to-one Christian care to hurting people in and around your congregation." Could you volunteer to visit a grieving member of our church? Could you offer support to someone who is terminally ill or to their family? Could you spend time with someone who is homebound, hospitalized, or in a nursing facility? Again, the brochure states: "Stephen Ministry is Christ caring for people through people." If you can BE THERE for someone in transition, speak to Sheila McGregor, Phil or Fay Trowbridge, or any other member of the Congregational Care Committee.

A 3rd way to offer the gift of companionship is by volunteering in your community. Every town or city in this area is looking for volunteers to give one or two hours/week. Two weeks ago, for ex., West Hartford's Volunteer Office sent an email "looking for someone with writing experience to help a blind gentleman compose his autobiography." "Another person to help a young man who is color-

blind organize and systematize his wardrobe.” “Someone to visit a homebound woman to knit, crochet or play scrabble with her.” “And a visitor for a homebound gentleman with a passion for discussing WWII and current events.” The same email also sought volunteers to work in the Town’s Food Pantry, and others to teach conversational English to foreigners. Contact your own local government, to learn how you can offer the gift of companionship to someone in need.

My friends, God came to us long ago in the person of Jesus the Christ! And God comes to us this morning in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper! The Bread and the Cup are THE GIFTS OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD! In these simple elements, Jesus offers HIMSELF to us, His FLESH and His BLOOD! He is identifying with us in our brokenness, our illness, our confusion, our pain, our failure! Jesus offers us peace during turmoil; healing in place of sickness; comfort amid loss; clarity of thought in place of uncertainty; life where there seems to be only death! May the gifts on the Communion table symbolize for us all the blessings which God gives to those who seek salvation! Let us open our hearts, our minds, our selves to the presence of Jesus, the Host of the sacred meal! Amen!