

Let us pray: O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

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TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT

by Tom Bracken

Some of you will remember that this was the title of the movie in which Humphrey Bogart first acted with Lauren Bacall, and fell for her in real life right on the set. Watch the movie sometime – you can see and feel the chemistry on the screen. Fear not - this message has absolutely nothing to do with that movie! But this message has everything to do with the title itself.

“To Have and Have Not”. Sometimes we think we have things that we don’t really have at all. And sometimes we don’t even realize what we have. Sometimes we hold on to things for which we have no use, and give away things we need. Sometimes we think things are precious that are not, and sometimes we give no value to something priceless. Sometimes... Okay, I actually just confused myself.

Perhaps I’ll start again, this time with a visual. And today, we not only have a Liturgist, we have a Liturgist Plus – our own Vanna Margie! Vanna Margie is going to help me figure all this out...

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Now let’s get serious. Both the Psalm and the Scripture reading talk about receiving gifts (which is good), and hoarding them (which is not). Anyone here a hoarder? Do you have more stuff in the attic or the garage than you want to think about? I have stuff in trunks in the basement that I’ve carried through six moves since I crashed and burned 10 years ago. You know, “just in case”?

But possessions (important or trivial), and even the riches and the crops mentioned in today’s Bible passages, are ultimately just “stuff”. Houses, cars, smart phones, all of it – just “stuff”. This little routine we did, and which we’ll wrap up a few minutes hence, is done with “stuff” – because I hope it will help make a more significant point. And please don’t get me wrong – I really like “stuff”! However, in our Gospel reading today I think Jesus is looking at something a little bit different, and a lot more important. I think our Lord is talking about gifts of the spirit, and gifts of the heart.

When we had the children’s moment just now, if I had actually withheld those pastry crisps, rather than offer them, those young people may have caught a resentment for a while, but they would get over it. I think. But what if I were a parent, and withheld the gift of love from one of them? Or perhaps, even more subtle: what if I withheld approval based on the B’s on their report card, because they weren’t all A’s?

It’s a good thing God doesn’t hold us to THAT kind of a standard, isn’t it...

Unfortunately, there are still ways in which I withhold the gifts God gives to me, even now. Perhaps you can even think of one or two examples in your own life. Have you ever stopped forgiving a friend or family member, because they keep doing the same thing to you over and over, and “I’m sorry” just doesn’t cut it anymore? Do you have a gift of service your church desperately needs, but don’t offer it because you’re afraid it won’t be good enough? Do you avoid talking to someone because they make you uncomfortable, and you’re afraid they’ll want to talk to you more and more?

And, in case you think I'm talking down to you: I'm still guilty of all of the above, and much, much more. 12 years ago I had all the "stuff" I could want – but I had turned my back on every gift of the spirit God gave to me.

And I paid a very heavy price for that. [pause] But I didn't have to...

Perhaps this is the time go back to God's symbolic gifts, on the table and all over the floor, and see if we can solve the dilemma of "me". I think I'll need a second helper for this; I already have Vanna Margie, how about... Vanna Danna? Oy veh!

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It took me over 60 years to figure out this simple truth: that it makes no difference what gifts, or how many gifts, God gives to us – it's how we share them with others that counts. My most valuable fiscal asset is a little car with a quarter of a million miles on it; and yet I am rich beyond measure, because my spirit is healed, and God showers me daily with His love.

In most of the translations I've looked at, today's Gospel reading is referred to as "The Rich Fool". Just as an interesting aside, or more likely one of those God-incidences, I'd like to read you the very next few verses that follow in Luke, immediately after today's reading [Luke 12:22:31]. It almost seems like God is saying "take My gifts and use them to My glory; and don't worry, My gifts are infinite, I'll take care of you".

What do *you* think?

I want to end with something that happened this past week. It's a tough story, but it shows both the frailty of life, and how God works in all our lives. I didn't write it down – I need to share it with you, not read it to you.

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To have. To have not. If we let Jesus into our lives and into our hearts, we will never have to worry about that second part.

Amen.