[Isaiah 51:1-6](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=156)

[Psalm 124](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=156)

Romans 12: 1-8

Matthew 16: 13-23

THE NEW LIFE

We’re all familiar with the old adage that if you give a man a fish, you’ll be feeding him for a day, but if you teach him how to fist, you’ll be feeding him for a lifetime. The point of the adage is something along the lines that certain gifts are much greater than others, even if they don’t produce the immediate satisfaction.

And I know we’ve all heard the stories of how often the people who win the lottery end up with their lives ruined by it, or at least with lives that are a good deal more unpleasant than they were before. And the moral here, I suppose, is something along the lines that even the greatest blessings can become curses if you’re not careful with them.

Those are good, common sense morals, and we’d do well to take them to heart, especially in the social and political arena, where we are supposedly interested in doing good for people. Simply giving **things** to people for their near term gratification, or giving too much, is pretty certain to end up by providing more evidence for yet another old adage: that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

But I think there’s yet another way to look at gifts, and that is to see how some of them are foundational for others. The gift of some degree of artistic talent, for example, is foundational for the gift of an art scholarship; the gift of self-discipline is foundational for the gift of mastering an instrument; the gifts of certain sorts of personality are foundational for the experiential gifts of joy, or awe, or falling in love.

When we start thinking about gifts in that way, it should soon occur to us that there is one gift that is foundational, not just to some other gifts, but to all other. And that of course would be the gift of life. Without life itself, there can be no growth or development. It is itself the prerequisite – as we used to say about certain college courses – it is the prerequisite for everything else.

And the other side of that coin, of course, is that when life ends, there can be no further growth or development. In the natural reckoning, the end of life is the end of the personal journey: there are no more experiences, no more stages, no more gifts. The tragedy of the natural reckoning is that, in it, death is always victorious, and by its inevitable victory, brings the gift receiving and gift-giving life of every person to a close.

But there is another way of reckoning, and a much more important one. It is the reckoning of the new life we are given in Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old [life] has passed away; behold, a new [life] has begun.” (5: 17)

I believe our Gospel reading from Matthew for today is about the transition from the old, natural way of reckoning to the new Christian way of reckoning. It is often referred to as the ‘hinge’ of the entire Gospel, because everything prior to it had been about Christ’s wandering ministry, but everything after it happens on the fateful road to Jerusalem and the Cross.

That is certainly an apt characterization of the passage, but I think the passage also has something very important to teach us about the new way of reckoning, and especially about what the foundational gift of the new life in Christ is. So let’s now read the passage together, and then think about what it’s telling us about the new life.

Matthew 15: 13-23

The heart of this passage is the recognition on the part of Peter that Jesus, this young man standing in front of him, is not just the Christ – that is, the long-awaited Messiah, the long awaited savior of the Jewish national aspirations – but this young man stands in a unique and very special relationship to the one God Himself. The phrase Peter uses is Son of God although at this point the full meaning of the truth expressed by that phrase would not be grasped by Peter or anyone else until after the events of the Passion and Resurrection and Ascension and, most of all, of Pentacost.

But it is the vital first realization, however immature, that Peter had to receive, and which all Christians must also receive and accept, as the genesis of the new birth. Recognition of the divinity – not of the magnificence, not of the power, not of the wisdom, not of the goodness – but of the divinity of Jesus is the doorway God needs to hand us the gift of a new life.

And that’s exactly what Jesus says in His response. “You’ve been blessed, Simon,” he says, “you’ve been blessed by a revelation from God. Human reasoning can’t arrive at my divinity: that can only be a gift from God.”

And so it remains, up to this morning and this hour and it will remain so until the old has completely passed away.

But now, notice what Jesus immediately says in following. Having told us that the belief, faith, trust in His divinity is the source of the new life, he immediately adds that ‘the gates of Hades’ will not prevail against it.

“The gates of Hades” is a pretty dramatic image. “Hades” was a Greek word that was used to refer to the afterlife, which was never thought of any more clearly that as a shadowy, dark ghostlike place where the spirits of the dead – good and bad alike - went after death.

There has been endless commentary looking for deep meaning in the phrase, but to me it’s pretty simple, especially given the context we’ve already discussed. Jesus was simply using it – or perhaps Matthew was using it tin translation of what Jesus originally said – as a poetic image of death.

So what Jesus is saying is that the new life we are born into in believing in His divinity, that new life will be markedly different in one very important respect: It well have no end.

As Paul expressed it in Romans:

[**5**](http://biblehub.com/romans/6-5.htm)For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. [**6**](http://biblehub.com/romans/6-6.htm)We know that our old self[***a***](http://biblehub.com/esv/romans/6.htm#footnotes)was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. [**7**](http://biblehub.com/romans/6-7.htm)For one who has died has been set free[***b***](http://biblehub.com/esv/romans/6.htm#footnotes) from sin. [**8**](http://biblehub.com/romans/6-8.htm)Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. [**9**](http://biblehub.com/romans/6-9.htm)We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (6-9)

Or as Jesus Himself put it: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.”

And if we return now to where we started, perhaps we can begin to see why the gift by God to us of a new life through faith in the divinity of Jesus, why that gift is really the true fulfillment the true reality of gift giving.

Give a man a fish, and you’ll feed him for a meal. Teach him to fish, and you’ll feed him for a lifetime.

Christianity is not a collection of good things like blessings and wish fulfillments and warm fuzzy feelings that are distributed to us like presents under a Christmas tree. Christianity teaches a way of life, a life characterized by humility, unqualified forgiveness, mutual respect, self-sacrifice, and unshakable trust in God. It asks us to attend church and to support the church and to encourage others to worship with us. It teaches us to spend time in reading the Word and in prayer. It asks us to participate in Communion on a regular basis. Will those get us lots of blessings and stuff? Maybe or maybe not. Probably not; probably not. But Christianity also teaches that we are not to judge the value of the advice on the basis of what we see.

As Paul writes: “…we life by faith, not by sight.” (2 Cor. 5:7)

And unlike those lottery winners who wish they could escape their new life and have their old life back. Their problem is that, although their new life was foundational for all kinds of new gifts, the gifts they got tended to be envy, jadedness, and anxiety.

The gifts of the Spirit, though, as Paul assures us, are: “…love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”Galatians 5: 22-23)

It’s hard to imagine we’d ever grow weary of them, isn’t it?

And so, Father, this morning we pray that you keep us ever mindful that the greatest gift off all, the gift of a new life that you gave to each one of us, the gift that is foundational for all the other gifts of the spirit, the gift that will enable us to draw ever closer and closer to You, the gift of sharing Your own eternal life…keep us always mindful that that gift was paid for at a fearsome price, the life of Your own Child, and we offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ.