

Christmas Day

“The Gift of Loving Kindness”

Isaiah 62:6-12

Luke 2:1-20

Growing up Christmas Day in my family was the time of exchanging gifts. Presents under the tree created excitement and anticipation. As a child all that I could think about was what I was going to get for Christmas. The focus was on me.

As I grew older I began to expand my understanding of gifts. I learned that I could bring a smile to someone’s face by giving the ‘right’ gift which drew appreciation and gratitude. I also learned that one could give a gift out of obligation without much meaning attached. Not much given out of a thoughtful heart results in not much received. I remember Christmas shopping with a high school friend who was looking for a gift for his father. His parents were divorced and he did not have a good relationship with his dad. I asked him what he wanted to give his father. He said, “I don’t know. He never likes anything I give him.” He buys him a plain white shirt and we find his office where my friend offers his gift apologetically, “I know you won’t like this but here is my Christmas gift”. The exchange with his father reflects distance and after a few social niceties we excused ourselves and off we went.

It can be difficult shopping for the adults in our families. What message will this gift send? Will it be meaningful? Will my meticulous search for the right gift bring a smile on the face of a loved one? Or will it reflect a message of last minute desperation which may communicate, “I don’t care enough about you to actually prepare and plan ahead of time?”

Think about some of the worst gifts you have received. Have you ever experienced a look from someone wondering what was entering your mind when you purchased a particular gift for them? Gifts are a kind of relational currency indicating how we feel about one another. An unthoughtful gift might communicate to another that I don’t care enough about them to be thoughtful.

Here are some examples of messages that might be sent by our gift exchange. There is the “There’s something wrong with your gift but I won’t say it directly”. You might give someone a stick of deodorant which sends its own message.

Then there is the “I bought me this gift”. I might buy Betty a waffle iron as a way of saying “Now you can make me waffles”. After all, what is a guy saying if he buys his wife lingerie from Victoria Secret?

Then there is the worthless novelty gift. This might be found in a bargain bin. The person on the receiving end might not be thinking it as cute as the giver, however.

Or how about the cheapskate gift? Re-gifting falls into this category. Have you ever given a gift to someone that someone gave to you that you didn’t want? Wedding gifts often fall into this category.

The point is this. It is easy to get caught up in the message a particular gift might be sending us irrespective of the giver. That message may be positive or negative, but it is the message that is important. What message do I wish to communicate by the offering of my gift? What message might my gift send?

Over time I have grown to enjoy more the act of giving than receiving. I recall not understanding my father when I would ask him what he wanted for Christmas and he would reply, "Nothing, just your presence". Indeed, gifts do reflect relational currency. Good ones require thought, time, and effort (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec., 2016, pp. 59-60).

Luke is describing a gift that God is offering to us. It is a gift wrapped up in a person, a child to be exact. As with any meaningful gift, this one cost the giver. It is well thought out, both in intention and purpose. The recipient is foremost in the mind of the giver. Interestingly, it is not based on the apparent worth of the recipient. It is a gift that will benefit and bless. Within that gift, however, there is an anticipation of a response. As with all gifts offered in love, a response of gratitude fosters a deep sense of mutual joy.

On this Christmas Day God is offering us a gift. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Messiah, the Lord". The nature of this gift is personal and relational. And God desires to share the joy of his gift with us.

God knows that we need the gift he offers, perhaps more than we do. We all know deep down that we cannot save ourselves as hard as we try. But what is the essence of this gift? Why do I need it?

The gift is personal, to be sure, inviting a relationship. C.S. Lewis writes that "Christ died not only for humanity in general, but for each person, just as if each had been the only person there was" (Letters to Malcom, p.78). Luke quotes the angel, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people". The gift is offered to everyone. No one can walk away from the tree and complain that they were forgotten or excluded.

Perhaps this is understood in the context of Lewis' 'Narnia Chronicles'. Aslan the Lion dies in the place of Edmond. He does not die in the abstract for the sins of Narnia, just for the sins of Edmond. As a result, the deep magic is appeased and Narnia is not overthrown. All of Narnia benefits as the sin of one person, Edmond, is atoned for. Yes, Luke tells us that Christ dies for all and Lewis that Aslan dies for one. But in the death of Aslan for just one person the personal touch is revealed. Is it not so with Christ?

Lying behind this gift is a heart of love. What do you and I need at the most basic level of our lives? I need to know that I am loved for who I am. Every one of us does. Much of what we do throughout our lives is an effort to earn and attain that love. God's gift to us in the child lying hidden in that manger is one of such grace.

There lay God's gift wrapped in swaddling cloth. It is God's way of saying that regardless of who you are or what you have done, you are loved. We act like children who have forgotten who our father and mother are, where we came from, where our true identity is lodged. And so God enters our world

bringing into our awareness, that though we have forgotten who we are, our Heavenly Father has not. Through this gift our Heavenly Father is inviting us to come home for Christmas.

Paul says to Titus, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Titus 2:11). All we have to do is unwrap and receive it.

As with any gift, it assumes a response. Any gift of deep love and meaning is that way. God's gift of grace in the life of Jesus opens my life to a response of love in return. This gift of salvation is not responded to by a nod of the head simply acknowledging my intellectual assent to the idea of grace. I cannot truly receive this gift and go on as if I had never received it. In Titus 2:14 Paul tells us that this gift is given for the purpose of "training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly" (vs.12), a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (vs.14). There is an acknowledgment of identity and an expectation of a new way of living.

We are being invited to respond to the message which God's gift through the Christ Child conveys. The message of this gift informs me that I am loved, that in spite of who I am or what I have done, God deems me worthy to receive it and that by this gift God desires and has provided for my salvation. God is saying that what he wants most this Christmas is our presence and love. Love is inviting love into its heart.

William Stringfellow, one of my favorite theologians, reflects in his book, 'Grant It All Joy', that a gift can be refused or dishonored. We may vainly imagine ourselves deserving of a gift. We may also squander or misconstrue, despise, or be threatened by the generosity of the giver. None of these responses, however, can in any way negate the event of the gift, or impair its value or impeach the donor. This is true when I make a gift to another and no less true when God makes a gift to me (Homiletics, p. 62).

Having served as a Chaplain in the emergence room of Louisville General Hospital years ago I can identify with the experience of Rev. Judi Holmes-Jensen, a hospital chaplain in Milwaukee. She describes having to respond one night to three pediatric deaths, all sudden and unexpected and from different families. How may one know joy and offer praise in the midst of these kinds of losses and sorrows?

She describes how praise and joy, gifts wrapped in the package of God's salvation gift, do not necessarily mean in the context of human experience a surface joy dependent upon circumstances. God's gift to us in Christ is placed under the world's tree of hatred, violence, pain, sorrow, and suffering endemic to the human condition. When we respond to this gift of God's salvation, we discover joy as a spiritual fruit, cultivated in hard soil, watered by hope and surviving when the sun has somehow scorched our hearts. God's gift takes root in faithfulness and community despite the environment in which we find ourselves. Praise comes when, unseen by those too far removed, compassion, love, kindness, and tenderness spring forth (Homiletics, p.68).

The Shepherds and Mary and Joseph find themselves recipients of these wonderful gifts of God that night, the response to the gift of this good news eliciting heartfelt praise. Let us, too, this Christmas Day, join with the angel and the multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors".

This Christmas, let us receive and open our hearts to God's gift of salvation. May we allow the direction of our lives to be shaped by the transforming love of this gift within our hearts and extend to others this gift of God's loving kindness.