

Wesley United Methodist Church

December 28, 2014

"The Gifted."

Isaiah 7:10-17, Luke 2:1-7, Romans 11:33-36

Now that all or most of you have received and opened your gifts, have any of you had the experience of receiving a gift from someone you really don't know well? You casually know this person, but certainly do not consider him or her to be one of your good friends. And here this person gives you a gift. To your surprise, it turns out to be a really nice gift - one that you didn't ask for, but a really good gift from someone who is not really a good friend. Now, what is the first thing you want to do?

Right! You try to come up with a gift to give this person in return. Not out of gratitude - after all, you didn't ask for it, or out of friendship - after all, you hardly even know this person, but because you don't want to feel guilty. Right?

You don't want to feel indebted to that person. That gift lays claim on you, and you don't like that. It's hard to look that person in the face, now you are indebted to this virtual stranger. This person, in giving you a gift, has power over you.

It may well be, in Jesus' mind, more blessed to give than receive. But I'll tell you that it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when they receive a compliment. And watch what we do on Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically generous, giving people. That's one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas has become a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The media kept us posted on how many needy families we have adopted this December. The Salvation Army kettles enabled us to be generous while we bought groceries for ourselves at the supermarket, or gifts for our families at the shopping malls. People at the office, who usually balk at taking up a collection to pay for the morning coffee, fall all over themselves to collect funds to provide Christmas joy for some families who otherwise would have none.

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone becomes a giver, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens' story of the transformation of Scrooge, has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than Luke's story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells the tale of God's gift to us, Dickens told us a story of how we can give to others.

Yet, we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people, but because we are proud, arrogant people, for whom it is easier to give than receive.

The Christmas story, according to Luke, rather than Charles Dickens, is not about how blessed it is for us to be givers, but how essential it is for us to see ourselves as receivers. If you ever have been given a gift, a really good gift, by someone who is virtually a stranger, you know what I mean.

Oh, we like to think of ourselves as givers, powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people, for whom goodness consists being motivated to employ a little of our power, competence, and gifts for the benefit of the less fortunate among us. So, every Christmas most media set aside a few weeks to focus its audience' attention on the "less fortunate" among us. In so doing, the poor perform a valuable function in our society - namely, to remind us of how fortunate we are. How powerful, how competent, capable and self-sufficient we are unlike the poor, who are powerless and often considered incompetent, and depended upon the gifts of someone else to have a merry Christmas.

This is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. There, I think I could argue, the story is not about us givers, but our nature as receivers. Read again the accounts of the nativity in Luke and Matthew, and you will find that the stories of Jesus' birth go to great length to demonstrate that we had little to do with God's work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us that would be so strange, so beyond our imagination, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky. We didn't think of it, understand it, or approve of it. All we could do at Bethlehem was to receive it - a gift from a God we hardly even knew.

The faith that arises from this strange story of birth in Bethlehem trains us to be good receivers. It's tough to be on the receiving end of God's love. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. Several gifts have been acknowledged here this last week. Those who have on Christmas Eve expressed the desire to "belong" to Christ's church, and those who will belong to Christ's church in the month to come, you have heard and received God's grace and accepted the gift.

It is tough to admit that the things we need most come not as a result of our programs, projects, and striving, but as a result of God's gracious giving. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, modern people, than grace," is what John Wesley wrote a long time ago.

One of the most familiar Christmas texts is in Isaiah 7:14. Less familiar is the context in which it was written. Isaiah had been pleading with king Ahaz to put his trust in God's promise to Israel rather than alliances with stronger military powers (7:9). Isaiah warned Ahaz. Then Isaiah told the fearful king that God was going to give him a baby as a sign. "Isn't that just like God?" Ahaz must have thought. What Ahaz needed with Assyria breathing down his neck was a good army, not a baby.

This is often the way God loves us - with gifts we thought we didn't need, that transform us into people we don't necessarily like to be. With our advanced degrees, and armies, and government programs, and material comforts, and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little of ourselves to confirm that we are indeed as powerful and self-sufficient as we claim.

Then this stranger comes to us and blesses us with a baby, calling us to see ourselves for who we really are: empty-handed recipients of a gracious God, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a gift.