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Christmas Sermon. . .

WHAT A GIFT WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

By Rev. Stephen Bringardner

~ Scripture: II Corinthians 9:15 ~

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INTRODUCTION

We've been focusing on gifts this Advent. The last two Sundays, we've talked about what gifts we might bring—to others, to God, to the Body of Christ (the church). Each of us is a gift to the church—one that manifests itself in a concrete way in the time, talents, gifts and service we bring.

This Sunday, let's turn the focus around and look at what gifts God has brought to us.

Paul in **II Corinthians 9** extols the virtues of giving. . .how God loves cheerful, generous givers. Then he ends with this poignant exclamation in **v. 15**:

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

What is that gift? The gift of His Son Jesus Christ!

"Thank God for His Son—a gift too wonderful for words". That's how the Living Bible puts it. The gift that was given when the God of the universe took on human form and came to earth to live among us! That's what makes these days *"holy days"* (as opposed to *"holidays"*).

Let's "unwrap" that gift this morning and see what's in it for us. When you receive the gift of God's Son, it's like opening one of those gifts Matt was talking about last Sunday (i.e.: there's a box within a box within a box……). Some of them may not seem like "gifts" at first. Hang on and let's see. . .

I. FIRST, THERE'S THE GIFT OF **FORGIVENESS**

First and foremost, there is release from guilt & shame.

Which lead to the ability to once and for all close the door on the past.

Plus, there is release from resentments, vengeance, selfishness, dishonesty, jealousy, bitterness, aimless indifference, pride, arrogance, ingratitude, being domineering & controlling—all those "defects of character" which ruin relationships.

II. THEN THERE'S THE GIFT OF **LETTING GO**

Letting go of all those memories that hurt. I'm not talking about the "good ones" that come with missing a loved one, missing times past, etc. There's another gift for that [later].

I am talking about the ones in which you were hurt by something, by someone. Letting go takes the sting out of the wound.

For all those out-of-control situations swirling around you right now, *letting go* lets you enjoy life in the here-and-now no matter how others are living or disrupting your life.

This gift allows you to save energy so you can work on you. . .so you can grow and become all that God has purposed you to become.

III. THE GIFT OF CHOICE

Many of us feel locked in. . .like we have few options. Maybe it's more a feeling of lack of control. We get to thinking that *"this is the way it is, things will never be any different"*.

Even if your back is to the wall and your only option is to turn to Him (not a bad option, to be sure), when you do a whole new Way opens up. [That's right, Way. Jesus is *"the **Way**, the Truth, and the Life"*—John 14:6]

You find that He gives us one another to bear each other's burdens and to support one another. With that you can get pretty creative about problem solving. . .pretty proactive (not just reactive).

Choose Him today. Choose Him every time you bump into something difficult or too big for you.

IV. THE GIFT OF LIMITATION

Believe it or not, it brings a great sense of relief when we finally accept that *"no one can do or have it all"*. We have some control over our lives and what happens. But no one manages everything.

There is great SERENITY in changing the things we can change and accepting the things we can't change. Then we get to see God at work!

V. THE GIFT OF BALANCE

I don't know about you, but I struggle with the "all or nothing" syndrome. When I'm "up", things are wonderful. . .I'm wildly happy. . .on top of the world. Then something hits, and I'm "down". . everything's awful. . .it's hopeless. . .worse yet, "I'm" useless.

Having Christ in our lives doesn't "flatten" us out so that we're dull and boring. But it does tend to temper those wild swings from euphoria to depression and back, based on what happened today. It avoids the extremes of intensity. We're easier to live with. And we're less likely to make rash decisions or act on impulse—which almost always gets us in trouble.

VI. NEXT IS THE GIFT OF INTIMACY – a better sounding "gift"!

There is so much that gets in the way of true relating to one another (as friends, as spouses, as parents-and-kids). We play-act, we put on a false front, we let "old issues" get in the way, etc.

One of the most precious aspects of relationships when Christ is in our lives is *trust* and *sharing.* With Him in our lives, the spotlight is not on me, it is on others. That alone takes us away from the power struggles and the distrust. . .and enables us to be emotionally close to others.

Wouldn't it be great this season to (re-)capture that intimacy as spouses, that excitement for one another that you had on your wedding day? Go for it!

VII. THE GIFT OF SELF-ESTEEM

We've got it all wrong about self-esteem. We think it's always being in control, being strong, being powerful, being super-smart or clever—enough to change anything in my world that needs changing. But that's *grandiosity.*

Positive self-esteem, says Paul, is having a *"sober estimate"* (or, *reasonable assessment*) of who you are + what you can do. . .then accepting that and having a healthy self-respect. It's not trying to copy or outdo others; it's knowing where you belong in the scheme of things. Dogs and cats seem to be able to work that out so much better than we humans. We prefer power struggles.

AND NOW, THE THREE GREATEST GIFTS. . .

VIII. THE GIFT OF FAITH [cf. Hebrews 11:1]

With Christ in our lives, we have an *"assurance of things hoped for"*. The future holds promise. And a *"conviction of things not seen"*. God is at work even when we can't see what He is up to.

IX. THE GIFT OF HOPE

Remember when I was talking about "letting go of memories" a few minutes ago? I said there was another gift for dealing with the "sweet memories". This is it!

If you were to lose an arm, you would always miss that one arm. But if you let Him, God would enable you to look forward to what you could do with the one that remains. That's hope! Always looking forward to what's coming, no matter what's gone on before.

Many of us know the ache and throb of loss this season—a loved one, a way of life, health, something or someone we valued & cherished dearly. It may well be that the light has gone out on the stove. . .but as long as Christ is at the center of your life, the pilot light will never go out.

X. THE GIFT OF LOVE***

The greatest gift of all is not only to be loved, but to love—no matter what that costs.

Do you know this morning just how much God loves you—just for who you are and who He made you to be? You probably don't. . .I know I don't. I can't fathom it.

He wants to give you His best gift—a relationship with Himself through His Son.

ILLUSTRATION

When Marcie paints, she keeps the TV on. The sound in the background keeps her company. At this time of the year there are commercials *ad nauseum*: everything from cars with huge bows around them sitting in the living room TO expensive jewelry TO toys TO snow mobiles—all with the promise of no payments till mid-2005 (or even January 2006). *"Where's the love-joy-peace-hope in all that?"* she asked, exasperated, one night while we were catching up on the day. *"Why am I writing scripts for the lighting of Advent candles when our minds are so directed to these material things?"*

Whatever gifts you receive this Christmas, none will compare to the gift of Jesus Christ, God's only Son. . .and the gifts He unwraps within you as you walk with Him [list].

Thanks be to God for His indescribable Gift. . .and for His indescribable Gifts!!!

Now what you & I have to do is learn to be good RECEIVERS.

There's a promise in **John 1:12**: *"To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God."* Don't just believe "in" Jesus, believe "on" Him this morning.