

Receive the Gift

Christmas Eve, 9:00 service, 2009

Christmas Gospels

Whitefish UMC

- † The young actor was barely seventeen years old, and yet he perfectly captured the character of the elderly and crotchety Ebenezer Scrooge. His facial expressions, his voice, even his hunched-over gait embodied that iconic character in the classic seasonal drama, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.
- † As we settled into our seats at the Bigfork Playhouse production of the musical version called "Humbug," we heard once again what has become the essential message of Christmas: Christmas brings out the best in us, and even the worst among us can become generous, giving people.
- † Have you noticed that the best popular and classic Christmas stories are about giving to others? In the weeks before Christmas, I've been reading most nights from collections of those stories.
- † Think of one of our favorites, *Stubby Pringle*, about the lonesome cowboy who sacrifices his evening at the Christmas dance so that a poor homesteader family can have a bit of Christmas. Then there's O Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, in which a young couple gives their most treasured possessions so that each other might have the gift of their dreams.
- † Even children's books take up the theme—there are so many tales about the gifts of shepherds, of lambs, of animals. The songs of Christmas are often about giving, too. *The Little Drummer Boy* and *In*

the Bleak Midwinter offer invitations to give from the depth of our being.

- † The other day, while savoring a bowl of soup alone in downtown Whitefish, I happened upon an article in the glossy magazine “Flathead Living.” The author exhorted readers that in order for givers to receive the pleasure of giving, we need to think of Christmas as a time for “getting what we want,” too. Of course, he then invited the reader to shop for oneself from the advertisers in the magazine.
- † At first I found that notion so offensive that I spilled my soup on the page and felt satisfied about it. After sighing deeply about the commercialization and wanton spending that gets so many of us in trouble at Christmas, I went on my way to shop for presents for our out-of-town family.
- † And then, in one of my anthologies of Christmas devotions, I read this provocative statement by William Willimon, written when he was chaplain at Duke University: “It may well be, as Jesus says, more blessed to give than to receive. But it is more difficult to receive....”
- † “We are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, and often arrogant people. The Christmas story—the one according to the Gospels, not Dickens—is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.”
- † Ouch. He goes on to say: “We prefer to think of ourselves as givers—powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence, and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas.

- † There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we—with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities—had little to do with God’s work in Jesus.
- † God wanted to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant maidens, and stars in the sky to get it done.
- † We didn’t think of it, understand it, or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from a God we hardly even knew.” And that, really was the point: until that moment when Jesus was born, people had been substituting their wisdom, competence, and plans for God’s.
- † And this Christmas, it’s still true. Because our popular culture tells us that we have deep within us the ability to solve all our problems. All the self-help gurus repeat that mantra, and I confess that sometimes I find myself falling into that same trap.
- † In seminary, we were taught to sit quietly and listen intently when someone comes to us for counseling; to ask questions, offer no direct guidance, and let the troubled person know something to this effect: “I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. Down deep, you know what your real problem is and that you have the resources to deal with it.”
- † And at some level that’s true, but only if we first make room for God’s gift of Jesus to be received in us. We need first to be receivers in order to be givers. So does that mean that we must adopt the attitude of the writer at “Flathead Living” and shop for ourselves first?

- † Of course not. But it does mean that we ought to admit that we don't have all the answers, aren't self-sufficient, and can sometimes find ourselves to be shipwrecked on the shoals of life.
- † Yet how hard it is to admit our need of God. Have you noticed that the word "needy" has become one of the worst things you can say about a person? We don't like people who are helpless and always looking to others for a hand-out or a solution to their problems.
- † How then, can we acknowledge our deepest need: to receive the gift of God's very self into our lives and our world?
- † There is a beautiful story recounted every Christmas in the forests of southern France. It's about the four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the child. One brought eggs, another bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the fourth brought nothing at all. The people called him L'Enchante.
- † The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked, how cozy was the cave and how handsomely Joseph had appointed it, what a beautiful starlit night it was. They congratulated the proud parents, presented them with their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask.
- † Finally someone asked, "Where is L'Enchante?" They searched high and low, up and down, inside and out. Finally someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft, into the crèche.
- † There, kneeling at the manger, was L'Enchante—the Enchanted One. Like a flag or a flame taking the direction of the wind, he had taken the direction of love. Throughout the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu—Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

- † A beautiful story, to be sure. But aren't most of us uncomfortable with that kind of adoration and extreme Christ-centeredness? It sounds a little obsessive, and that sort of thing makes us queasy. But what if we were to say that searching for God in all the aspects of our Christmas would make it more significant?
- † One day Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking down the road. Francis noticed that Leo was depressed. Francis gave some of the best advice for depression ever: "Focus your vision outside yourself on the beauty, graciousness, and compassion of Jesus Christ. The pure of heart praise him from sunrise to sundown.
- † Even when they feel broken, feeble, distracted, insecure and uncertain, they are able to release it to his peace....Simply discover the emptiness in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew."
- † "But how?" asked Leo. "Simply hoard nothing of yourself; sweep the house clean. Sweep out even the attic, even the nagging painful consciousness of your past. Accept being shipwrecked. Renounce everything that is heavy, even the weight of your mistakes....
- † See only the compassion, the infinite patience, and the tender love of Christ. Jesus is Lord. That suffices....You are no longer aware of yourself, like the sparrow aloft and free in the azure sky. All your desires are transformed into a pure and simple desire for Jesus."
- † Oh, but only if it were that simple, we say. And yet, God sends us a message this Christmas and every Christmas. Sometimes it is necessary to become a child again to know the intensity of the present moment and to forget what lies behind us.

- † A few hours ago, our children acted out the Christmas story once again. We all love pageants, and one reason is the awe and wonder of the children at being a part of the story themselves.
- † Even God had to resort to becoming a baby for us to receive the gift of God's self. As a pastor I am privileged to sit with parents as they prepare for the baptism of their children. I am convinced that most parents don't hear much of what I say because they are so focused on gazing at the child in their arms.
- † God loves us the way parents are meant to love their children—with that intensity of purpose and commitment. And we are meant to come to the manger tonight with the joy and adoration of new grandparents at the birth of their grandchild.
- † A couple of weeks ago, a friend posted photos of his new grandbaby on his Facebook. Of course the baby is beautiful, but what struck me were the pictures of his wife and himself and the way they looked while holding the baby. Their faces were so alive with light and joy!
- † In 1980, the day before Christmas, a mother was busy wrapping packages and asked her young son to shine her shoes. Soon, with the proud smile that only a seven-year old can muster, he presented the shoes for inspection. His mother was so pleased, she gave him a dollar.
- † On Christmas Eve as she put on the shoes to go to church, she noticed a lump in one shoe. She took it off and found a dollar wrapped in paper. Written on the paper in a child's scrawl were the words, "I done it for love."

- † We have little trouble doing a lot for those we love at Christmastime. We make ourselves crazy with the doing. But tonight, come to the nativity scene of this night empty handed.
- † Hang out at the stable and be detained by the baby in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Why? So you can be among those who, when asked why they aren't busier getting ready, can reply, simply, "I am doing it for love—of Him."
- † Receive the gift of God this Christmas. And let the words of the carol we sang tonight ring true: "O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." Amen.

Sources:

William Willimon, "The God We Hardly Knew" in Watch for the Light, 2005.

Brennan Manning, "Shipwrecked at the Stable," Ibid.