

"GIVING AND RECEIVING"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 14, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

Remember the little girl who received a pin cushion from her grandmother at Christmas. She did the proper thing and responded shortly after Christmas with a thank you note that said:

"Dear Grandma: Thank you so much. I have wanted a pin cushion all my life, but not very much."

Giving and receiving what what we're thinking about here this morning for a few minutes. For these are the days when we're getting ready for Christmas. Buying and wrapping. Giving and receiving.

GIVE YOURSELF

How many of you read Dear Abby? She recently had a column in the Post entitled "Give Yourself For Christmas". I liked it. Let me share it with you because it ties in with what we're thinking about here today on this Third Sunday in Advent.

DEAR ABBY: Last year you printed a letter from a young lady who was discouraged about the attitude of family and friends about Christmas. She said that all they were thinking about were the presents and parties and big dinners, so she considered taking a room in a hotel for a day, but it was too costly.

It was a very fine column. Please print it again.
Signed: VLH

DEAR V: Here it is:

DEAR ABBY: I'm having a hard time deciding what to do for Christmas. I live about 10 miles from my parents' home, but I don't want to go home for Christmas because it is a depressing time for me. My parents go to church regularly, but they don't act like good Christians. All Christmas means to them is a pretty tree, lots of presents and good food. But it means so much more to me.

I don't want to stay where I live because the people I live with have the same attitude about Christmas. It's all presents and food. Most of my friends are expecting a gift from me and I can't afford any. I was thinking of leaving town for the day, but I can't afford a hotel room. Can you give me some advice on what to do? I hate this time of year. It's so depressing!

YOUNG AND UNHAPPY

DEAR YOUNG: Get in touch with a nursing home, a veterans hospital or a children's institution, and offer to visit those who have no one to visit them. You don't need to bring presents; just a cheerful attitude, a happy face, and a willingness to listen and chat awhile.

Offer to write letters, read, make a phone call, run and errand.

When you do something for someone else, it's impossible to feel depressed. Try it. It really works. Then write to me and tell me what kind of Christmas you had. I care.

JESUS / GIVING AND RECEIVING

I hope that as you make your preparations for Christmas that you'll keep Jesus in mind. As I said last Sunday. Jesus is the reason for this season. And not only is He the model for generous and uncalculated giving, but He is also the model for gracious and unselfish receiving.

Remember that beautiful incident recorded for us in John's Gospel, that word picture that describes the occasion when Jesus was a dinner guest in a home in Bethany. Suddenly an uninvited guest burst into the dining room - a woman bearing a gift of expensive ointment. And she proceeded to pour the precious ointment on the feet of our Lord. Call to mind the reaction of the guests to this gesture, to this costly gift.

That gesture brought forth grumbling among some of the dinner guests. "What's the point of such a terrible waste?" "Look at the mess she's caused". "It could have been sold and the money given to the poor". But Jesus quietly said, "Let her alone...why must you make her feel uncomfortable; she has done a beautiful thing for me."

Arthur John Gossip, in a commentary on this passage of scripture, once wrote this word:

"Always the great giver was the most grateful of receivers; and in this instance He saw past what to us would have been the embarrassment of the situation, and thought only of the affectionate heart so full of thankfulness."

That's a lovely line..."the great giver was the most grateful of receivers". We're encouraged to be generous givers...but think for a moment...how are we at receiving? There's a certain amount of careless and thoughtless receiving in our world - from pride that finds it hard to accept kindness - or from greed and selfishness that takes it all for granted - or from sheer thoughtlessness that simply neglects to note and respond.

I once knew a person who before Christmas Day was hardly over would have her slip of paper and pencil in hand, writing out her list of gifts to be exchanged, making arrangements with those who had given them how to go about the great exchange. How often I was tempted to say something like this to her:

"When someone plans for and made even sacrifices to give you a gift, don't make the person feel he has made a mistake or exercised poor judgement. Let the person know how much you appreciate it.

Don't kill his joy in giving by being a poor receiver. When someone pays you a compliment in words, don't disagree with the giver or minimize his gift - for kind words are a beautiful gift. Accept them gratefully, even though you may not deserve them...or believe them."

Giving and receiving. Both are manifestations of Christian love in action. As we go about our preparations, remember Jesus - "the great giver who was also the most grateful of receivers."

DEEPER TRUTH

Now there's a deeper truth to be mined here in today's message, simply that the real meaning and light of Christmas really depends first of all upon the grace of receiving. It was so at the first Christmas, and a century later, the author of the Fourth Gospel, summed it up in words about Jesus when he wrote:

"He came to His own, and His own people received Him not...but - to all who received Him, gave He power ...POWER...to become children of God".

Let that word seep in...let it sink in. That's the word we're searching for and desperately need to hear. Midst all of this colorful pageantry of the Nativity Story - the shepherds, the Wise Men, Mary, Joseph, the baby in the manger - midst all of this there is a great truth that shines forth. Into our world of human affairs had come a new life, yes...a new power...capable of making a profound difference in the lives of people. Some recognized it and received it, while others perhaps because of pride or pre-occupation or just sheer indifference missed out on it altogether. In that life mankind finds the deepest of all meaning and the highest of all hope.

"I bring you good news which shall be for all people". Yes, it had and has universal implications - a message here for all mankind. It is the message which the world never quite remembers, but has never quite forgotten. The message of God's love breaking through into the arena of life. It was a message that strangely did not stay in a tiny far-off corner of the Roman Empire. It began to spread - like wildfire - to Asia Minor, to Greece, to Rome. It was a Word about a gift - a gift of incredible and incomparable value - not to be earned...only to be received - the very gift of God Himself - breaking through to us, coming through to us in the person of Christ, wrapped up in "swaddling clothes" - a child in a manger.

It was and still is only a matter of listening. Of accepting. Of receiving.

GRACE OF RECEIVING

Some may have trouble accepting so simple a word. We feel we must build those steep steps of requirement - as though to be a follower of Jesus somehow depends upon how much we know, or do, or give, or how many points we manage to score in the game of life. We miss the glory and the joy of it all if we see the path to Bethlehem's manger through any such maze or conditions - a road containing toll gates through which we must pass in order to touch Eternal Truth.

Having made a study of the world's great religions, D. T. Niles, the late and great Christian spirit of Ceylon, made this point in considering the difference between religion in general and Christianity in particular:

"That other religions have to do with man's attempts to improve and save himself, and that Christianity has first of all to do with an act of God performed in man's behalf which man must receive."

It all begins not with our giving, but with our receiving - the gift of God, incarnate in Christ Jesus. This is what the Gospel and the Good News is all about. And never does it shine with greater brilliance than at this time of year. In Christ, in all that He stands for - forgiveness for the past, strength for the present, courage and hope for the future, love and healing for all of our hurts, light for life's journey, amazing grace for all of our needs - God is trying to give us something, to give us something.

TODAY There may be some person or person present today who needs to hear this word and to receive this gift.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, as we brush up against Eternal Truth in these coming days, may we be willing to listen...to heed...to accept. And then like the Wise Men, who followed that star and that light that eventually grew to become the light of our world, may we seek to find His spirit at work in the city...not only to worship Him, but eventually to return as did they, "By another way" - the way of hope, of peace, of joy and love.

PRAYER

"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift
is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of
His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world
of sin;
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the
dear Christ enters in."

Make each of us sensitive to your presence and nearness in these moments, O God, on this Third Sunday in Advent. Come in to our lives and heal them. Come into our hearts and calm them. Come into our world and redeem it.

In the spirit of the Christ Child. Amen.

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