

"THE GRACE OF RECEIVING"

INTRODUCTION

"Twenty-three Ways to Find Pleasure in Giving" read the caption of an ad in the papers recently, and there were displayed twenty-three suggestions for gifts, all available in a particular store here in the city. The theme of that ad reflects the spirit of Christmas - "pleasure in giving". And this is evident in our homes as purchases become packages with bows and bells, designed to convey affection to those who are very special to us. It's evident, too, in the general out-pouring of kindness and good will conveyed through our cards in this joyous season. It all goes back to the word and the deed of the One who is at the heart of Christmas. He once said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the highest authority for the declaration that there is "pleasure in giving".

GRACE IN RECEIVING

Against that background, it may - at first - seem somewhat inconsistent to declare that there is also "grace in receiving". And yet, when you stand back and think about it, the Gospel always maintains a certain balance between apparent opposites - a certain rhythm between divergent notes and accents. Bishop Gerald Kennedy some years back wrote a book on the paradoxes of Christianity, and in the foreward of the book, he made this observation:

"The Gospel knows that human virtues are not absolutes, and that when they go unchallenged by the tension of an opposite virtue, they go wrong"

We see this illustrated many times in the New Testament. Peace and tension. Judgment and forgiveness. Humility and assurance. Prudence and recklessness. Personal piety and social responsibility. With any of these pairs of opposites, if you focus exclusively on one to the neglect of the other, you are dealing with only "half a Christ" for He kept them so beautifully in balance. Never just one or the other - but both.

SCRIPTURAL INCIDENT

So it is with this matter of giving and receiving. Jesus is the model for generous, unmeasured giving, but He is also the model for gracious, unselfish receiving and sometimes we overlook this.

Return for a moment to the Scripture Lesson read earlier in the service - the word picture of the occasion when Jesus was a dinner guest in a home in Bethany, and suddenly an uninvited guest burst into the dining room, a woman bearing some expensive perfume, and she proceeded to pour the precious and expensive ointment on the head of Jesus. This gesture on her part brought forth resentment among the dinner guests, just as it would do today if a similar thing happened. "What's the point of such wicked waste" grumbled some of the guests. "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". In a commentary on this passage, Arthur John Gossip writes:

"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".

"The great Giver was the most grateful of receivers" - a beautiful line to remember regarding Jesus.

GRATEFUL RECEIVERS

I have the feeling that this says a needed word to most of us, not only at this time of year, but all of the year - for we are not always the most grateful or most gracious receivers.

For instance, you may see it in extreme form in the person who simply cannot graciously accept a gift or a kindness or a treat, who always insists upon being the donor, never the donee. Or, you may see it in more common form in the discomfiture of people over kindnesses shown and compliments given. There are some who do not graciously receive what is gladly and thoughtfully given.

Two of my best friends in Seminary were both exceedingly generous men. One of them recalls a day when the other had presented him with a birthday gift of a lovely book that obviously had cost him some money. And the birthday recipient protested about his lack of deserving and his friend's lack of good judgment in spending so much money on the book, whereupon the donor responded in words which the recipient remembers to this day in some such fashion as this:

"John" he said. "Sit down. I'm going to give you a lecture and I hope you'll remember it. When someone plans for and maybe even sacrifices to give you a gift, don't make him feel he has made a mistake or exercised poor judgment, but let him know you appreciate it very much.

Don't kill his joy in giving by being a poor receiver. And when someone pays you a compliment in words, don't disagree with the giver or minimize his gift for kind words are gifts, too. Learn to accept them gratefully even though you don't believe you deserve them. A compliment is a gift not to be thrown away carelessly unless you want to hurt the giver".

There is a certain amount of careless, thoughtless and ungracious receiving in this world - from pride that finds it hard to accept kindness - or from greed and selfishness that takes it all for granted - or from cynicism that is doubtful of sincerity - or from thoughtlessness that simply neglects to note and respond. Sometimes we're guilty of spoiling a gift by the manner in which we receive it.

A person should pay as much attention to how he receives as to how he gives, for both are manifestations of Christian love. As well as finding "pleasure in our giving" in these coming days, let us also give thought to the manner of our receiving, remembering that "the great giver was the most grateful of receivers".

DEEPER TRUTH TO CONSIDER

But there's a deeper truth to be mined here in today's sermon - simply that the real meaning and light of Christmas 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:

"He came to his own home, and his own people received Him not. But to all who received Him, gave He power to become children of God!"

Midst all of the pageantry that surrounds the nativity story - the shepherds and the wise men approaching a baby in a manger - there is a great truth that shines forth. Into our world of human affairs had come a new life and a new power, capable of making a great difference in the lives of people. Some, of

course, recognized this and received this, while others through pride or preoccupation missed out on it completely.

Supposedly the birth announcement of Jesus was not an exclusive announcement addressed to a few select folks. It was a universal proclamation. "I bring you good news, which shall be for all people". Maybe it was intended for all the people in Bethlehem when Jesus was a baby, or in Nazareth when he was a youth, or in Jerusalem when He was a man - but only a few paid much attention. It was finally a matter of listening, accepting, receiving. "To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become children of God".

Yet - this was the word that strangely enough did not stay in a tiny corner of the world. It began to spread beyond Palestine - to Greece, and on to Rome - a word about a gift of incomparable value, not to be deserved or earned - the gift of Christ; himself.

Yet, that word became twisted and perverted in the centuries that followed. People, even in the church, could not quite believe that man's salvation began with so simple an act as receiving a gift. Surely it must depend in large part upon a person's earning, deserving, doing, working for it. And so there grew up in the Middle Ages an elaborate system of equating Christian discipleship with so many good deeds performed, so much money paid, so many pilgrimages made. Until after many a struggle, Martin Luther and his kind received and then relayed the basic note of the New Testament, "As many as received Him, to them gave He power".

We still have trouble accepting so simple a word. We are tempted to build steep steps of requirements, as though to be Christian somehow depends upon how much we know, or how many good works we perform, or how good we are. And I think we miss it completely if we see the path to the manger through any such maze, or the road to Bethlehem containing toll gates through which we must pass. Dr. D. T. Niles, the late and great Christian spirit of Ceylon, made a study of the great religions of the world and said that this is 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."

WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT

"The Grace of Receiving" - this is what the Christian interpretation of life is all about. It begins not with our giving, but rather with our receiving - receiving the gift of God, incarnate in Christ. Before one can know the joy and pleasure of giving, one must know something about the wonder of receiving. That is what the Gospel is all about, and never does it shine with great glory and meaning than it does at this time of year.

In Christ and in all that He stands for in our faith - forgiveness for the past, strength for the present, courage for the future, nurture for our characters, love and healing for our hurts, light for the journey, amazing grace for all of our needs - God is trying to give us something, trying to say something to us. He loves us. Christmas really begins with a hospitable heart, and before you can know the deep joy and pleasure of giving, you must first have come to receive and accept the wonder of his coming. The question is and each must answer it for himself: Do you accept. Do you receive? Are you willing to take that "leap of faith"?

THE CHILDREN AND THEIR GIFT TO US

I love the story of the little boy who was given a part in his church's nativity drama. He was cast as an angel. He had one, very important line to say: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people".

He learned his part well. He said it at breakfast, at supper, and at night before going to bed. But, as you might guess, on the night of the performance when he moved out on the stage and saw all the people, his mind suddenly went blank. And when the moment came for him to say that beautiful line, all he could think to blurt out was: "Say, have I ever got some good news for you!"

Now, in the next few moments we shall have the joy of receiving a gift that the boys and girls of our church have prepared for us. It's their interpretation of "the good news" of the birth of Jesus. It's quite lovely - not long, and we invite you to stay to receive it, knowing that it will add to your celebration of Christmas this year.

PRAYER We thank thee, O God, for the deep joy of giving and the wonder of receiving thy gifts. Help us to prepare our hearts and our lives that there may be room in them to receive the new life that is coming. We ask these things in the name of Him who was born in a stable, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen