

THE GIFTS THAT MATTER MOST

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Christmas Day, December 25, 2011
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Readings from the *Tao Te Ching*, 67

The Master says, "I have three treasured gifts that I hold and protect."

One is called compassion, the second, moderation.

The third is not presuming to control the world's events.

Compassion leads to the power to be more courageous.

Moderation leads to the power to be more generous.

Not presuming to control events leads to the power to control one's self.

Nowadays people forsake compassion and become instead fearful.

They forsake moderation and become self-indulgent and weak.

They become self-important and rush headlong toward destruction.

Through compassion, the spiritual master can fight to overcome these things.

Those are not destroyed whom heaven has armed with such love.

from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 12:1,4-10, 31; 13:13.

Now, concerning spiritual gifts, brothers & sisters, I do not want you uninformed.

. . . Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. and varieties of services, but the same Master. There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing. . . to another prophecy . . .

But strive for the greater gifts. And will show you a still more excellent way. . .

For faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

*Hymn 231

Angels We Have Heard on High E.Marlatt/ French carol

During this season of gift giving a good exercise is to make a list of the best gifts we ever got. That will tell us what is important, for ourselves and for people we want to give gifts to.

While I remember a Daniel Boone hat and a magician set with special affection, the nicest gifts I ever got are in quite another category: the carillonneur at Rockefeller Chapel who let me strike one of the largest tuned bells in the world during his playing of *Ein Feste Burg*; my mother giving me a complete Shakespeare for my 14th birthday; coach Al Terry saying, “Little Wells, grab your bonnet,” and permitting me to enter as a freshman into my first varsity football game; a beautiful lady on a ship when I was still an acned teenager who kissed my face all over and told me she thought I was handsome; Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman telling me that he had thought for several hours about a question I had raised and responding with a written answer the next day in front of the whole class; night after night my father playing catch with me in the back yard until it got so dark we couldn’t see the ball; a Unitarian minister in Kalamazoo who put his arm around me after my father died and kept it there a long time; a friend who flew several hundred miles to visit me when I was sick; a buddy who went to see threeth movies with me on the same day.

The nicest gifts people have given me have been enabling, confirming gifts, bestowing understanding and self-esteem, help in time of trouble and delight for ordinary days.

May I suggest that you, too, draw up your list of the nicest gifts you ever received? I think it will give some perspective on the kind of gifts we really want to give one another, at Christmas or anytime.

Freely have we received of gifts that minister to our needs of body and spirit.
So now gladly we bring to this, our spiritual community, with its wide concerns,
some small portion of this bounty. Your offering may be both given and received.

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Sunday, December 25, 2011
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In his poem, "Christmas 1963," Joseph Enzweiler writes,

Because we wanted much that year
and had little. Because the winter phone
for days stayed silent that would call
our father back to work, and he
kept silent too with our mother,
fearfully proud before us.

Because I was young that morning
in gray light untouched on the rug
and our gifts were so few, propped
along the furniture, for a second
my heart fell, then saw how large
they made the spaces between them

to take the place of less. Because
the curtained sun rose brightly
on our discarded paper and the things
themselves, these forty years,
have grown too small to see, the emptiness
measured out remains the gift,

fills the whole room now, that whole year
out across the snowy lawn. Because
a drop of shame burned quietly
in the province of love. Because
we had little that year
and were given much.

Garrison Keillor read those words on "The Writer's Almanac" on NPR when I first sat down to write this sermon. They were a gift, as I hope they were to some parents who this year too had to make spaces between the gifts they could afford their children.

Some of us probably need spaces of time in this over-filled season. Time to do things like the spiritual exercise Clarke Wells suggests: The nicest gifts that *I* ever got? Well, before I even went to school my mother bought, on the installment plan, for a dollar a week, a

huge set of volumes called “The Children’s Book House.” It started with nursery rhymes and ended with the great legends, from the Greeks to the Bible to the Knights of the Roundtable. No wonder I own so many books now! When I was five, after my younger brother was born, my father took me along with him on a business trip by train, all the way from New York to Chicago. I was wide-eyed at meeting famous people in the dining car – a man who had run for President! – but the best gift in all that was simply my dad’s time and attention, since he worked long hours.

Just as some of the other nicest gifts I ever got were also more like spaces than things. Like Mrs. Johnson, my third-grade teacher, who told me that I really needn’t bother with fourth grade, I could skip to fifth, and then took the time to give me the tools to do that. Or the basketball coach in high school, who saw that I was younger and ill-coordinated, but let me be the statistician, and write the articles for the local paper, and travel with the team when we won the state championship. Or my first real mentor in ministry, the Rev. Barbara Hollerorth, who gave me more real work than a student minister normally gets, and then, when I expressed some anxiety about just how to do certain things, said, “Listen, John: in the ministry, as in life, the point isn’t so much to learn just what to do but to learn how to behave well – when you don’t know what to do!” Or the tough old layman in my first congregation, who, when I was reeling after a series of tragic deaths, slapped me on the back before the second of the three funerals in a week, and told me, “Well, ah know one young preacher who’s gonna earn his pay round here this week!” And jarred me out of self-pity and gave me the gift of refocusing attention on responding to needs around me by simply by behaving as best I knew how.

Yet we live in a society that too often seems confuses technique and facts with real inner wisdom and material things with the inner gifts that really matter. Why, just look at the many incidents of graft by political leaders, not only unwise, but caught with their hands out, seeking “gifts” in the most crass and self-serving sense. Or the way in which so many groups and institutions approached the government’s attempt to “bail-out” or revive our economy – “What? nothing for us?” Or all the many economists and pundits with conflicting opinions about just what technical fix they believe will rescue us all.

During the holiday buying season, which I've sometimes "the Great Annual American Consumer Potlatch," we exchange material gifts with one another in ways that are enough to make a Biblical scholar regret that the legends around the birth of Jesus ever included the three Magi, bearing symbolic gifts no real child could ever use: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And why? The first, it's said, because he was to be a king, the second because he was to be adored as divine, the third because he was destined to die – reminding me of the scene in *The Life of Brian*, the Monty Python parody of the story -- when Brian's mom yells at the magi as they go, "Next time skip the myrrh, eh?"

But back of all of this outward show of gift giving, I think, lies a more real human need: for an exchange of gifts that really matter. The writer Lewis Hyde, in his book *The Gift*, actually studied the so-called "potlatch culture" of native people in the Pacific Northwest. What he found was that at their festivals, the exchange of outward gifts was really all about creating or renewing what he calls "the gift economy," which is very different from the market one. It's about relationships, and spiritual interdependence. Hyde says, "Unlike the [purchase or] sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved." And if there is an obligation to receive, as well as to give, or even to reciprocate, that's not all bad. A poet himself, Hyde writes movingly, about depending upon, in his writing, and his life, upon what he has received, and what he feels obligated to give back to the common spiritual good. To quote him:

"A circulation of gifts nourishes those parts of our spirit that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from nature, the group, the race, or the gods. Furthermore, although these wider spirits are part of us, they are not 'ours,' they are endowments bestowed upon us. To feed them by giving away the increase they have brought us is to accept that our participation in them brings with it an obligation to preserve their vitality."

I like that. Gathered here in a place dedicated to the re-circulation of such treasured gifts as compassion, moderation, and the relinquishment of the illusion that we can control the world's events, I have no embarrassment in asking its members to remember this community in their year-around giving. As an offertory round in our hymnal puts it, "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share, and from this we live."

Even a little child among us is meant to be able to understand that. And yet how quickly we forget! How quickly we fall into either expecting this thing, or feeling entitled to that! The last few weeks, as I've been rather over-working as your minister, I was growing a little surly, even depressed. When Gwen asked what I wanted for Christmas, I said, "A day off." She then pointed me back to a poem by the Sufi master, Rumi:

"We should ask God," it begins,
To help us toward manners. Inner gifts
Do not find their way
To creatures without just respect.

If a man or woman flails about, he not only
Smashes his house,
But burns the world down.

Your depression is connected to your insolence
And your refusal to praise. If a man or woman is
On the path, and refuses to praise – that man or woman
Steals from others every day – in fact is a shoplifter!

The sun became full of light when it got hold of itself.
Angels began shining when they achieved discipline.
The sun goes out whenever the cloud of not-praising comes near.

Or as another poet, Rilke, put it, "To praise is the whole thing." To be grateful: the most basic form of spiritual discipline. Because *life itself is a gift*, not to be taken for granted. Admittedly, if we look for the price tag that comes with the gift, it's clearly this: one day we'll all have to die. In the meantime, our religion is written not in what we say or pray, but rather in our lives, our deeds.

One of the important gifts I received from my friend and one-time colleague in ministry, Forrest Church, is that basic reminder. He was younger than I when he died of cancer. Twice in his final book, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, he mentions that Christmas can make us miss those whom we have lost. Indeed it can.

Grief and loss and sadness, if honestly faced, can bring their own kind of spiritual gifts. But sometimes a little support is needed for that. So I offer you the gift of a listening ear.

As Emerson once said clearly, “The only true gift is a portion of thyself.”

So I hope you receive this season, especially these days which T.S. Eliot referred to as “the still point of the turning world,” as a gift in itself. For behind the Christmas legend is the reminder that not only Jesus, but every one of us is meant to be gift to humankind, using our own spiritual gifts to bring a little light to others.

For where will our children, and our children’s children, derive their capacity for the spiritual gifts that matters, if we do not discipline ourselves to receive them, then to pass them on? May the exchange of gifts ever continue: the spiritual ones that matter most. So may it be. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 228

Once in Royal David’s City

Seaburg/Gauntlett

Benediction

In the words of my friend, Forrest Church:

“Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.”

You are a good gift. Now go into this season both giving and receiving, Circulating the gifts or fruits of the Spirit, which are said in the Bible to be “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

And may the inner grace of this season,

From every source, teach you the way back to them wherever you go.

Go in peace. Amen.