

Christmas Present (Advent 2011 Series)

1 of 3

28 Days of Gifts

John 3:16

1st Sunday of Advent

11 27 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Christmas Present

Our Advent Worship Series is entitled *Christmas Present*. The title has a twofold meaning. “Present” can refer to the gifts that we give and receive during the holiday season. However, “present” also has a temporal meaning—what happens in the here and now between the past and the future. We will be exploring both aspects of the term.

We begin this morning by looking at the presents that we give to others. Next week we will go shopping for ourselves. Then we will discuss what to give to the God who has everything. Today’s sermon is entitled *28 Days of Gifts*.

Scripture: John 3:16

First Christmas

This is a true story. The names have been changed to protect the . . . clueless! For the record, let me CLEARLY state that this is NOT a personal narrative of yours truly. I may be dumb, but I’m not THAT dumb.

Some years ago a young couple fell in love and got married. The months passed and the holidays arrived—their first Christmas together. The inexperienced husband knew he had to find just the right present for his beloved. He carefully pondered the options before buying her a gift.

On the Big Day, his entire family gathered around the Christmas tree. “Ooohs” and “aaahs” accompanied the unwrapping of each gift. Finally, the moment came for the young wife to open her husband’s very first Christmas gift. She eagerly tore open the ribbon and paper. In front of her in-laws, she pulled out . . . a *THIGH MASTER!*

A dead silence fell upon the living room. The only sound was a sudden intake of breath from all the women present. The more experienced men of the family began edging towards the nearest doorway.

The young husband realized something had gone dreadfully wrong. He cleared his throat and explained, “I know how much you enjoy going to the gym, and so I thought this would be a great gift, and you could work out at home, and then you could . . .” The man’s voice trailed away as he slowly realized the magnitude of his sin.

I will spare you the messy aftermath of *The Great Thigh Master Disaster*. Needless to say, it turned out to be a VERY cold Christmas! However, the young bride eventually forgave her rookie husband’s mistake. Today they are still happily married; and at least ONE of them can laugh about the incident.

Gift Giving

There are only 28 shopping days left until the Big Day. **Are you ready for Christmas?** For the vast majority of us, the answer is a resounding, “NO!” There’s always a few folk who do their shopping back in July and can relax during the December madness; but I wouldn’t trust them to watch my dog!

Like Saint Nic, we are making our **lists** and checking them twice—“naughty or nice” really doesn’t affect the equation. The rush between Thanksgiving and Christmas becomes a stressful race to make sure we buy something for everyone on our list. Only when the last name is checked and the final gift is wrapped can we relax.

Part of the problem is that we often don’t know what to get our loved ones. This is one reason why **gift cards** have become so popular. It’s a curious phenomenon if you think about it. It feels tacky to give someone cash which never expires and can be used any time and place. So we use cash to buy gift cards that do expire and can only be used at a particular place.

I gave up knowing what to give my parents years ago. So I often buy them gift cards to their favorite restaurants. In turn, they often give cash gifts. Several years ago it struck me that we were just swapping money for a cash neutral exchange!

On other occasions, we give wildly **inappropriate gifts**. You open a present and want to say, “Have we met?!? Do you even KNOW me?!?” Instead, we give a polite smile and say, “How nice.”

A holiday cartoon depicts a wife saying to her husband: “*Thank you SO much. You gave me exactly what I need to exchange for exactly what I want!*”

The 1983 movie, *A Christmas Story*, tells the story of nine year old Ralphie who only wants a Red Ryder air rifle. On Christmas morning, he opens his gifts, including an unexpected and unwelcomed present from his ditzy Aunt Clara.

DVD	<i>A Christmas Story</i>	Begin: 1:16:21	“Christmas had come.”
		End: 1:19:19	“Take it off!”

It was a pair of Pink Bunny Rabbit pajamas! As his father put it, he looked like a deranged Easter Bunny or a nightmare in pink!

It reminded me of a Christmas from my own childhood. My grandmother was a wonderful woman, but she had no idea what to buy a 10 year old boy—even though she had successfully raised a boy of her own. On my tenth Christmas, she gave me a coat, but not just any coat. It was a caramel colored, velvet coat . . . with fake fur trimming . . . and a sash. I wore it one time—when she came by the house later that day!

The Greatest Gift

Some well meaning Christians believe we should do away with Christmas presents altogether. Their goal is to return to a simpler time and lifestyle. They complain that commercialization and materialism have robbed the season of its true meaning. In fact, I received a letter from an organization at redefinechristmas.org with this aim. The web site reads in part:

Redefine Christmas is a movement that re-imagines the way we look at gift giving during the holidays. In addition to the things we enjoy shopping for and giving every year, we often feel compelled to spend money and time on gifts with little meaning. Gifts which are soon forgotten. Rather than giving in to the convention of giving, we can give out – by redirecting some of that money to charity.

I sympathize with their sentiments. Christmas is about the Savior and not a sale, a manger and not Macy's, Bethlehem's babe and not a bargain.

However, I would disagree with their basic assumption. Ultimately, our children are right! **Christmas really is all about presents.** Our getting and giving are inspired by God himself. Like small children imitating our parents, we reflect God's love when we give and receive.

In Bible studies and sermons, I have heard leaders refer to the wise men's gifts to the baby Jesus as the first Christmas presents. They are incorrect. The very first Christmas gift ever given was by the Lord God Almighty.

The Biblical stories of Christ's birth are found in Matthew and Luke. However, our Scripture lesson today contains a concise retelling of the Christmas message. The familiar words of John 3:16 declare the good news: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."*

It is good news of great joy to all people. For born to us today in the city of David is a Savior who is Christ the Lord. In a lowly manger, God gave himself in love. The gift came wrapped as a baby in swaddling clothes. Now that's gift giving by the master gift giver himself! We did nothing to earn or merit such a marvelous, miraculous present. Yet God in his love gave it to us anyway.

Grace is the theological name for it: a gift freely given. It reveals the spirit of the Giver: our God who is head over heels in love with His creation. For God so loved the world, he gave. For God so loved you and me, he gave. For God is love. God whispers to us in each carol and candle, in every kindness and crèche, *"I love you!"*

1 John 4:19 says that *"we love because God first loved us."* To paraphrase the verse, *"we give because God first gave to us."* The gifts that we give are in imitation of the Master Gift-Giver.

Someone said that during the holidays **we become more of whom we are**—both the good and the bad. We tend to be more generous during Christmas than any other time of the year. Charities receive a disproportionate amount of their annual donations during the final weeks of the year. There's a reason why the Salvation Army rings bells at its red kettles during December rather than July!

28 Days of Gifts

The day after Thanksgiving marked the official beginning of the holiday shopping season. "Black Friday" signaled the start of the one hundred yard dash to Christmas. Some raced the crowds in the predawn darkness for bargain sales. I'm not saying such folk are crazy, but I wouldn't trust them to operate heavy machinery. There are only

twenty-eight shopping days left until Christmas, and we will cross the finish line breathless and exhausted.

Today also marks the beginning of a new year in the church calendar. November 27 is the first Sunday of the **Advent** Season. Advent literally means “arrival” or “approach.” It is the four week season of preparation before Christmas. During these 28 days, we anticipate the celebration of Christ’s coming into the world.

Christmas Present—28 days of gifts. Consider giving a gift every day of Advent. I’m not talking about something from the mall, box store, or internet. Instead, something that is much more valuable and meaningful: a giving of yourself through time and energy to others around you.

Your bulletins today include an insert of an **Advent calendar**. The calendar has daily suggestions of things to do , 28 gifts to give. It is by no means an exhaustive list—simply a starting point. There is nothing sacred about a particular activity on a particular day. Feel free to mix and match. You are a creative people—use your blessed imagination to come up with other ideas that are appropriate to your life and setting.

Here are some thought starters:

- ✓ Sign up to ring the bell for the Salvation Army
- ✓ Adopt a child from our “Angel Tree”
- ✓ Invite someone to Wednesday night supper
- ✓ Extra Credit: Sit with someone new at Wednesday night supper
- ✓ Take pet food by the Animal Shelter
- ✓ Bring an unwrapped gift for our Basket Ministry
- ✓ Visit someone in the nursing home
- ✓ Pray 10 minutes for someone going through a difficult time
- ✓ Invite someone to worship during December—especially consider the Christmas Musical, the Children’s Program, and Christmas Eve
- ✓ Bring someone to see the Living Nativity
- ✓ Volunteer to be in the Living Nativity
- ✓ Send a thank you note to someone very meaningful in your life
- ✓ Pray for your church staff
- ✓ And the list goes on
- ✓ If you run out of other ideas, love is always the right size and color.

More Blessed to Give than to Receive

I grew up hearing the adage, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” Here’s a pop-test: Is this statement from the Bible? We often credit proverbs by Benjamin Franklin and other famous authors to Scripture. In this case, however, the verse does come from Acts 20:35. In a sermon to the church at Ephesus, Paul said:

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

You cannot find these words by Jesus anywhere in the Gospels; but apparently Paul drew on another source. *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* When I heard these words as a child, I recall thinking to myself: “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” I liked RECEIVING a whole lot more than GIVING!

Over the years, however, I’m glad to report that my selfish perspective has changed. It turns out that Jesus knew what he was talking about! I’m at an age where it really doesn’t matter what I get for Christmas. Oh, I will enjoy the presents that my family and friends give; but the joy and meaning of the season do not hinge on what I receive.

And I have discovered the joy in giving. The best moments around the Christmas tree are not when I’m unwrapping a present but when a loved one unwraps something I gave to them. Recall even the best gifts are but a poor substitution for ourselves.

How often have you given a gift to someone else—perhaps a material present but also a gift of time, energy, effort, service, and love—and walked away saying, “I got so much more out of that I gave.”

It’s a Scriptural and spiritual principle: the more we give, the more we receive. If you really want to be “selfish” this year and get the most out of the holiday season for yourself, then give. And you’ll be amazed how much you receive in turn.

God is our heavenly Father, and we are his well beloved children. When we unwrap the gifts of love, grace, and salvation in our lives, God must experience the same feelings that we do.

The Gift of the Magi

The author, **O’Henry**, wrote a short story entitled *The Gift of the Magi*. It has become a holiday favorite. The tale describes the importance of giving just the right gift.

Young married couple, Della and James "Jim" Dillingham Young, are very much in love with each other but can barely afford their one-room apartment due to Jim's recent pay cut. For Christmas, Della decides to buy Jim a chain for his prized pocket watch given to him by his father's father. To raise the funds, she has her long, beautiful hair cut off and sold to make a wig. Meanwhile, Jim decides to sell his watch to buy Della a beautiful set of combs made out of tortoiseshell and jewels for her lovely, knee-length brown hair. Each is surprised to find the gift they chose rendered useless, yet each is pleased with the gift that they received, because it represents their love for one another.

The story ends with the narrator comparing the pair's mutually sacrificial gifts of love with those of the Biblical Magi

The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the new-born King of the Jews in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. In a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

(Summary taken from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gift_of_the_Magi)

Conclusion

There are only 28 shopping days left until the Big Day. The Season of Advent is all about getting ready for Christmas. In a time of financial crisis and economic hardship, I encourage you to give 28 days of gifts—gifts of love, laughter, and joy to your family, friends, neighbors, congregation, and community. Give until it hurts. Then give some more until it feels good.

God so loved the world that he GAVE his only begotten Son. We love because God first loved us. We give because God first gave to us. Christmas is the season of giving. It turns out that it really is more blessed to give than receive.