

The Gifts of Giving and Receiving ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Happy holidays to you all. And for those of you who can hardly wait for tomorrow to arrive, Merry almost Christmas. As many of us know all too well, the weeks surrounding Christmas are very special and typically also very busy. This time of year, commonly referred to as the holiday season, often includes families gathering together, sharing food with family, friends and neighbors, and, let us not forget, the giving and receiving of gifts. Anyone who has recently attempted to make a quick trip to the shopping center knows that the practice of giving and receiving gifts for Christmas is a prominent focus of the season. Giving and receiving gifts is a tradition I have engaged in and enjoyed my entire life. That said, my understanding of the meaning of Christmas causes me to look at the consumeristic aspect of our culture with more than a little concern. So as Christmas rapidly approaches, I would encourage us to consider the practice of giving and receiving from a different angle. I would invite us to shift our focus away from the giving and receiving of gifts, and to instead consider the gifts of giving and receiving. I would ask us to divert our attention, at least for a brief while, from the tangible, namely the physical gift, to the intangible, to the process of giving and receiving. By doing so I believe we might find ways to better appreciate and live out the deeper meaning of this holiday.

How though do we make such a shift in focus? It is easy to notice and pay attention to what we can see, hear and/or touch. But attending to a process? That is more challenging and certainly not anywhere near as attention grabbing as a brightly wrapped present. One approach to considering giving and receiving from this different angle is through reflection. By recalling events from the past with an eye toward what they have to teach us, we can see things that may not have been obvious before.

As I began reflecting on this season, memories from the span of my life began flooding into my mind. My earliest memories of the holiday season are from around age 4 or 5. The images that are clearest and brightest are the ones of the Christmas tree aglow with lights, adorned with beautiful ornaments, and surrounded by presents, all brightly wrapped. Yet when I attempt to recall the images of when those brightly wrapped presents were opened, well those scenes are just a blur. Back then my understanding of Christmas and what it was all about was limited to the glittering tree, some fellow with white hair and a white beard all dressed in red, and the presents, especially the presents I was going to get. In those earliest memories, the presents were definitely the most memorable and important aspect of Christmas.

But as I grew older my perspective changed. And my understanding of Christmas grew and changed as well. The fellow with the white hair and the red suit lost his magic as well as the status he held when I was a young child. The tree and the presents were still significant but I had a new understanding of their meaning. The new meaning came as a result of learning the meaning of Christmas and the reason it is celebrated. And at some point, I don't recall quite when, there was a shift in my perspective on giving and receiving gifts.

When I was young, it seems like my primary focus, and quite possibly at times my only focus, was on receiving gifts. But there came a point when giving became

meaningful. It became meaningful when I began to notice how others responded to a gift I had chosen for them. I recall the looks of surprise, the smiles, and even a few happy tears when someone would open a present I had given them—a present that touched their heart. This was when giving became not only meaningful for me, it became important. And I believe this is also when I first began to realize that giving and receiving are gifts in and of themselves.

I am sure those of you who grew up in families that celebrated Christmas have your own memories. And I would imagine that, like me, many of you can recall special moments connected to giving or receiving a present. And maybe at some point you also realized that there was something more important than the gift itself. Maybe that something was the thought or feeling behind the gift. Or maybe it was the sacrifice that was required to obtain the gift. Or possibly it was what the gift represented, the connection between you and the person who had given or received it. There are a multitude of possibilities here but the point is, at some point all of us recognize that the gift itself is secondary to what it represents. When we arrive at that awareness we can begin to recognize that giving and receiving are, in and of themselves, gifts.

So we now have two gifts to consider, the gift of giving and the gift of receiving. Just as with tangible gifts, each one is unique and each one holds a different value in our lives. In each of our lives, we value these two gifts, yet quite probably in different measure. I know this is the case in my own life. As I mentioned earlier, in my earliest memories of Christmas, receiving was what mattered most. But that changed as I got older. At some point giving became more important than receiving and that is still the case today. I believe the value I placed on giving has had a significant impact on the careers I chose to pursue. Giving to others is an important element of the work in ministry as well as in my prior career as a social worker.

Now I want to be very clear here. I don't believe for a minute that the gift of giving is superior to the gift of receiving. Both are equally important, and I believe equally valuable. My experience has taught me that having balance in one's life is preferable to living a life that is out of balance. And yet I recognize that in my adult life the gifts of giving and receiving have frequently not been in balance. I have given one preference over the other. My guess is that some of you may identify with what I am sharing here. I have come to believe that many people place a higher priority on one of these two gifts. If you recognize this to be the case for you, I say welcome to the club and congratulations. I say congratulations because by recognizing and acknowledging that we have given one of these gifts preference over the other, we are able to identify a area where we have room to learn and grow. I don't know about you but I would rather know where I could benefit from learning and growing than remain unaware. And I much prefer learning and growing to becoming stagnant.

Once we have a good idea which of these two gifts we may need to focus more attention on we are ready to go to work. Or are we? If I have neglected the gift of receiving, how do I work on developing this gift? If you have been inattentive to the gift of giving, how do you develop that gift? Like so many things we learn in life, developing either of these gifts takes practice, regular practice. The good news is there is plenty of opportunity to practice both giving and receiving, and not just during the holiday season but throughout the year. But first we need to identify what it is we are going to practice.

For me, and possibly for some of you, I need to practice accepting and receiving what others have to give. This can be a challenge at times since I was raised and taught to be independent and to take care of things myself. As a result, I don't provide the opportunity for others to give to me as often as I could. Providing more opportunities to receive then is the first thing I need to practice. But I need to go a step further. I need to practice graciously accepting what I am offered. This is tougher than step one. And finally comes the practice of demonstrating genuine gratitude and appreciation to the other person, if not for what it is they have given, at least for the thought and the care behind it. Luckily, in this Fellowship, as giving as you folks are, I know I will have ample opportunity to practice the steps I have mentioned.

And for those who have developed the gift of receiving more fully than the gift of giving. What is the practice that can help you find a better balance between the two? You may want to begin by identifying what it is you have to give. You may have time, or talent, or resources that another might appreciate and benefit from. Next, you could determine where or to whom you could give what you have to offer. Keep in mind that this is practice and with both of these steps, what it is that you give may be small or simple. The more you practice the better you will get at it. And then comes the practice of giving generously and feeling gratitude for the prosperity you possess that makes the giving you do possible.

Finally, I want to acknowledge those who have developed and learned to balance both of the gifts I have been talking about. Those of you who give generously without denying your own needs. And feel at ease expressing your gratitude and appreciation as you receive from another. You folks have something to teach those of us who have not yet developed both of these gifts to their fullest.

The steps I have shared here are not the only ways to practice developing the gifts of giving and receiving. These are just a few ideas to consider. I would encourage all of us to think about and add to the list of practices. It is my hope that we will share with one another our thoughts and ideas about how any one of us, or even all of us, might develop the gifts of giving and receiving.

As I stated earlier, giving and receiving are gifts, gifts that we can practice and develop in our day-to-day lives. I believe that if we could all learn to develop both of these gifts, to fully develop both gifts, and live them out in a balanced way in all we do, each of us would be a better and a happier person. And it seems to me that if the gifts of giving and receiving were practiced every single day of the year by enough of us, our world would be a significantly better place as well—a place where gratitude, hope, generosity, joy and even peace were plentiful. It seems to me that these are the things that Christmas is really all about. So on this Christmas Eve, it is my prayer that many more people will shift their focus from the brightly wrapped gifts and attend to the gifts of giving and receiving. With the shift I believe we will discover the wonder and the beauty that these gifts contain. I am convinced that when enough of us are fully able to attend to and honor these two gifts, hope, generosity, joy and peace will be abundant, not just on Christmas Day but each and every day of the year.

May it be so