

“CHRISTMAS TIME: III - A TIME OF RECEIVING”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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John 3:16-21

Every once in a while, someone will say something to me, and then, with a look of astonishment on their face, they’ll say, “Oh no, I sound just like my mother!” Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever found yourself saying something especially to your kids that your mother or father said to you (and probably something you swore you would never, ever say to your own kids?) I have a feeling you have!

When you and I were little, our parents would say things to us that I would now call “proverbs about living” - things like, “what’s the magic word?” when we forgot to say please or thank you; or “look both ways before you cross the street,” or “don’t talk to strangers.” When someone was mean to us, and we were tempted to get back at them, a perfectly timed recital of “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you,” may have set us straight.

I remember very well two of my father’s favorite “proverbs for living” that he used with the six of us. One was “many hands make light work.” That came in real handy in a family with six children! The other was “be glad you were able.” That one came along when one of us was whining about having to do some chore. “Be glad you are able, because there are people who can’t do those things for whatever reason.”

There’s one more “proverb for living” that I know all of us heard all of our lives, and it is this: “it is more blessed to give, than to receive.” Now, at its heart, that’s a very good sentiment. It keeps us from being too self-centered. It keeps us open to ways to give to others. It reminds us that we have so much to give, and we need so little.

So it’s a good proverb for living. The trouble is, that in some ways, we’ve taken it too far. We give, all right, but many of us have troubling receiving. We’re uncomfortable receiving.

And, in many ways, our society reinforces that. One pastor wrote that, “in our society . . . it is easier to be a giver than a receiver. If you are a giver (he says), think of what it says about you. It says you have something that others want and need. It says you have value to confer on others. It says you’ve got freedom and

power because you decide what to give, when to give, and to whom to give.”  
(On-line, “Receive the Kingdom Like a Little Child, Rev. Adrian Dieleman)

In other words, when you’re the giver, you’re in control. To receive then, means to not be in control - and truth be told, we don’t like not being in control. It makes us uncomfortable.

So, when someone offers us a compliment, we find it awkward. One person played the piano in a worship service, and after it was over, a woman came up to her, and told her how beautiful it was. And you know what her response was? “Oh boy, didn’t you hear all the mistakes I made?” She was uncomfortable receiving praise.

I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve complimented someone on their outfit, and the first thing out of their mouth is, “this old thing? It’s been in my closet for years.” Uncomfortable receiving praise.

And have you ever given someone a gift you picked out just for them, only to have them say to you, “Oh, you shouldn’t have!” Uncomfortable receiving.

A lot of us are not comfortable being receivers. If that’s not you, congratulations - you’ve learned a wonderful, gracious thing - how to be a receiver. But I’m afraid that are more of us in this room who are more comfortable giving than receiving.

Well, my friends, Christmas is a time of receiving as well as giving. We talked about giving last week, and I invited you to give gifts of praise, time and love. But this week it’s the other end of the spectrum - receiving.

Once again, the wise men’s story, has much to tell us about receiving. I know that last week they told us about giving, but you know what? Even before they gave to the baby Jesus, they first received from Him. Look back at the story, and you hear this - that when they came upon him “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy, and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.”

When they did that, they received. They received so much. Oh, it’s not evident at first, unless you dig deep. Remember that these wise men were from the East, and they were not Jews. Here is this baby, this Jewish messiah, and these three foreigners, if you will, outsiders, for sure, were welcomed into His presence. They weren’t told to leave, they weren’t told that He had come into the world only for Jews, so hit the road, magi - no, they were welcomed into His presence - and as they were, they received a great gift - a great gift for all the ages to come. The message that there is no one outside of the bounds of God’s love in Christ Jesus.

He came to set all free - not just some. No one need be turned away. The wise men experienced that first hand, they received that, and then, they offered him their treasures, or as one pastor put it, "the gifts they gave were just thank you notes."

(On-line, "Giving and Receiving," Rev. Patricia Gillespie)

This Christmas, my friends, I invite you to be better receivers. Do me a favor, and don't utter these four words at all, this Christmas, "Oh, you shouldn't have." Don't let them pass through your lips. Just say "thank you."

Just as I did last week, when I invited you to give three things, this week I want to invite you to receive three specific things this Christmas season. First, receive God's love and acceptance. Do you know how much God loves you? The writer James W. Moore wrote a book, which was entitled, "If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is on It." Don't you love that, and don't you get it? My refrigerator is covered with pictures of people I love and care about. Every time I walk by it I see pictures, mostly of my nieces and nephews.

If God has a refrigerator, your picture is on it. God loves you beyond measure. Like the magi discovered, no one is beyond the bounds of God's love in Christ Jesus - no one. Too many people feel like there's some reason God couldn't possibly love them completely. Perhaps they feel like they're an outsider in the church, they didn't grow up there, so they feel like they don't measure up. Or perhaps they feel that God doesn't know the real them, and if God did, He surely wouldn't love them. For whatever reason, many people feel outside the bounds of God's embrace, and if that is you, embrace what the magi discovered that day so long ago - that everyone is in God's embrace - everyone. I think it causes God to weep when we count ourselves as unworthy of His love - when all He wants to do is draw us in. This Christmas season, receive the gift of his all-encompassing love.

Secondly, this Christmas, receive the gift of forgiveness. So many people struggle with this one. So many people won't let themselves be forgiven. They just keep beating themselves up over and over and over again for sins they have committed. They can't believe that God will forgive them.

One therapist was working with a patient who had that problem. She wouldn't let go of her past, and finally, in frustration, the therapist one day handed her a brick - a full-sized brick, and told her she had to carry it around in her purse every single day. As the week went on, the woman began to understand what a burden her unforgiveness had become in her life. It was dragging her down every single day. She finally got it, and finally let herself receive the gift of forgiveness.

How about you? Are you burdened with things in your life that you can't let go? Are you carrying around the burden of sin that God waits to lift away?

You know, I read once about a young teenage boy, who like all teenagers, couldn't wait to drive. His name was David Leroy, and he lived in Louisiana. David's dad ran a little mom and pop grocery store in their town, and saved money for years to buy his family a car. It was a 1928 Buick. It was the family's prize possession.

Even though David was young, his father let him drive the car around their property, where no one could get hurt. That only made him want to drive more and more.

Well, one day, when his dad was at work, David's mother said that she needed to take some clothes to the dry cleaners. "I'll move the car around front for you mom!" David exclaimed with excitement. And before she could protest, he was off like a shot in the direction of the garage to get the car. He was so excited that he got in the car, started it up, started to back out of the garage, and realized, too late, that he had forgotten to close the driver's side door, and with a crash and a sickening thud, the door ripped completely off.

His mother came running, and read him the riot act. "Just wait until your father gets home, young man! He's so proud of that car, now look at it!"

Well, David ran to his room and stayed there, and didn't even come out for dinner. He did however, listen at the door, as his mother explained, with exasperation, what happened to his Dad. David steeled himself for the uproar to come. He knew he was going to get it.

Instead, he heard this. He heard his father say to his mother, "Well, you're right Ruby. The car is precious to me, but not as precious as David Leroy. Just as you said, he didn't mean to do it. He was trying to help. We can get the car fixed. The main thing is that no one got hurt. He's our son, and he must feel awful right about now. We just need to love him through this." (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is on It*, p. 11-12)

My friends, if you have not received the gift of forgiveness for something you have done, or failed to do; if you're carrying unforgiveness around like that brick, in such a way that it's burdening your life, let those words from that father, be God's words to you - he wants to love you through it, and set you free. This season, receive the gift of forgiveness through God's amazing grace poured out in Jesus Christ.

Finally, this Christmas season, let me invite all of you to receive the gift of peace. Oh, how we sorely need peace in our lives and in our world. Everyday

seems rushed, and filled with upheaval and chaos. We go speeding through life, crossing things off our “to-do” lists, rarely slowing down to breathe.

God sent Jesus into the world to give us abundant life, not overwhelmed lives. He was and is the Prince of Peace, and wants for each of us to know the peace that only He can give, the peace that passes understanding. Receive that gift - don't try to do everything, and be everything for everybody. Let the peace of Christ pour over you, and be a part of you.

Today and all the days ahead, I invite you (and me) to remember that yes, it is better to give than to receive, but it is oh so important to be gracious and grateful receivers of the gifts others and most of all, God, want to give us.

I want to close with one more thing. It's a quote from Dr. James Mayfield. It goes like this: “The big difference between Christmas being a holiday and Christmas being a joy-filled holy day is whether or not we are aware of the love God expressed in the birth of Jesus. Christmas becomes truly Christmas when we receive what Christmas offers.” (On-line, “The Gift is Given . . . Then What?, Dr. James Mayfield)

How about it? Will Christmas for you this year be a holiday or a holy day? My prayer is that you will not only enjoy the gift of giving this year, but you'll also revel in embracing and receiving the great gifts God has for you - the gifts of love, acceptance, forgiveness, grace, peace - and the greatest gift of all - Jesus the Christ.

Amen.