

“A GIFT TO BE TREASURED”  
Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
December 24, 2018

Christmas Eve

John 1:1-14

Luke 2:1-20

Every day, after I get dressed, I go to my dresser to put on my jewelry and there I see it – one of the best gifts I was ever given – my Grandmother Bunnell’s hairbrush, comb and mirror. They’re old – very old, since she died back in 1966, but they’re in pretty good shape, a lovely shade of yellow. I love them because they were hers, but also they remind me of her hair. Grandma Bunnell had hair that went all the way down her back. It was beautiful silver hair, and every morning she would put it into a braid and wind it around her head, and every night, she would take it down and comb it. It was a sight to see.

But I also love that set because it reminds me of her spirit. She was spunky, to say the least. And I guess, when I was a child, I was spunky too. (Not anymore, of course!) But when I was in elementary school, Grandma Bunnell would stay with us for months at a time, and she ran a tight ship. Apparently, one day she found my hairbrush upstairs on the kitchen table and told me to put it away, which I didn’t do. She told me again, and again, and again, and then finally, her patience spent, she picked up my hairbrush and threw it down the stairs towards my bedroom, whereupon it broke in two. I’m sure I was heartbroken, but I got over it.

Years and years and years later, like probably around the year 2000, I was recalling that story with her daughter, my Auntie Sis. We laughed about it, and said, “Yes, that was Grandma Bunnell.”

A few months later, when Christmas rolled around, I got a package in the mail from New Jersey, and I opened it up and found in it Grandma’s own hairbrush, comb and mirror with a note from my aunt saying it seemed like a good replacement for the one I lost. And from that day, that set on been on top of my dresser, where every morning I remember my Grandma Bunnell, a great gift in my life.

Then I go downstairs and when I’m making my coffee I glance over to the side of the refrigerator where another precious gift can be found. It’s nothing fancy. It was homemade, in fact. A letter A cut out of a plain piece of white paper, but on it are the words that make it precious to me.

Let me give you a little background before I tell you the words. I was off at school and feeling homesick, and like all students living away from home, I loved to get mail. Every time I called home I would ask, “why haven’t you written to me?” or “where’s my letter?”

Then, one day, there came an envelope with my father’s handwriting on the outside, and that cut out letter A inside. And on the letter Dad had written this, “Karen, Here’s your letter. You’re an A in our book. Dad”

Two precious gifts that I treasure. Two gifts that remind me of people who helped make me who I am today, who loved me and who I dearly loved.

That’s what gifts are meant to do, aren’t they? Aren’t gifts meant to say to the receiver that the giver cares for them, and wants to bless them with something special? Isn’t that why you’ve spent so much time this season really thinking about what you’ll give to those you love? Isn’t that why you’ve searched for just the right gift that will cause their faces to light up, or their hearts to melt a little?

I know that many people feel like Christmas has become too commercialized, but I don’t think so, because underneath it all, underneath the hustle and bustle and seemingly endless list-making and shopping is our desire to give something to those we love to let them know how much they’re loved. And for we, who are Christians, we do it, we share gifts with those we love, because we have first been given a gift by the One who loves us most of all, God Himself – the perfect gift, a gift to be treasured above all else – the gift of His Son and our Savior Jesus the Christ.

We give to others because God first gave to us.

There was a little boy in England once who seemed to really understand that – he really made the connection about being thankful for God’s gift. Let me tell you about him. It was the day after Christmas at St. Peter’s Church in Kent, England, and Father John, the vicar, went out of the vicarage to take a walk, glanced over at the nativity scene on the front yard of the church and was startled to see that the baby Jesus was missing. Just when he was thinking of calling the police, he saw a little boy named Nathan walking down the street with a red wagon, and lo and behold, there in the wagon was the baby Jesus. Father John approached Nathan and asked him, “Nathan, where did you get the baby?” Nathan looked up at the priest, smiled and said, “I took him from the church.” “Well, why?” asked the priest. With a sheepish grin, Nathan said, “Well, Father John, about a week before Christmas I prayed to Jesus. I told him that if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas, I would take him for a ride around the block in it!”

While that's a cute story, the reality of the gift God first gave to us is far more profound.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor spoke about it, and put it so beautifully when she wrote: "In giving Jesus, the perfect gift, God said to us: 'I am so crazy in love with you that I have come all the way to where you are to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me – that I love you the way you are, love you enough to become one of you, and love you to death.'"

So on a starry night so long ago, in a manger in Bethlehem, God gave us this gift most to be treasured of all. You know the story so well. Born of the Virgin Mary, watched over by his earthly father Joseph, tended to by shepherds and angels, visited by Magi.

There's a wonderful telling of the Christmas story in a movie called "The Nativity Story." And in that movie there's a very touching scene where a rough looking group of shepherds, some carrying lambs, gather around Mary and Joseph. They kneel before the manger, and one old shepherd reaches out with a trembling hand to touch the baby, but in a moment of hesitation, he thinks better of it and withdraws his hand. Mary speaks to him gently, saying, "He is a gift for all mankind" and holds Jesus out to the old shepherd. Tenderly he reaches out to touch the little one whom the angels had said was his Savior, Christ the Lord. And as he does, he is overcome with deep emotion, tears filling his eyes. He looks to Mary, who says to him, and all who were there, "We have each been given a gift."

Oh indeed. They knew he was a gift, but little did they know what lay before them in that manger. They didn't know what we have come to know. That in that manger lay One who would one day feed the hungry – those who literally were starving for food, but even more, all of us who find ourselves hungry at times – hungry for purpose, hungry for meaning, hungry for answers, hungry. When we turn to him, he fills us.

In that manger, lay One who would give living water to the thirsty – not just those whose throats are parched, but all of us when our lives are parched, dry and dusty, when our hearts are broken and we don't know if we can go on.

In that manger, lay One who would stand up and challenge a crowd judging a woman caught in adultery to cast the first stone if they were without sin, forgiving her and inviting her to start a new life, and who helps us start over when we've done what we shouldn't have done, even when it's not the first time, and won't be the last, reminding us over and over again that we can begin again.

In that manger, lay One who would still a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and still storms in our lives, bringing calm when chaos wants to take over, bringing peace when we're afraid, bringing a sure sense of His presence when we feel like we might sink away.

In that manger, lay One who would call people to be all they could be, who still today speaks to us and reminds us that we have gifts to use for the kingdom of God, and gives us the courage to use them.

And in that manger, lay One who would stop at nothing to care for us, even going to a cross on Calvary, to give His life that we might have life eternal.

In that manger, God placed the perfect gift for each of us, and tonight like that old shepherd, we reach out with trembling hands and teary eyes to touch him, with gratitude for the life he gives us every single day. He is our peace, he is our rock, he is our redeemer, he is our Savior – a gift to be treasured every day of our lives.

We give gifts to those we love at Christmastime and all throughout the year, because God first gave this precious gift to us. I want to close tonight with a reminder of one more gift we need to give, and I'll do it by way of a story.

There was a family by the name of Tallcott who lived in the time of the Great Depression – a husband, wife and their one child. Their names were Marjorie, Sam and Pete. As was the case with many families in that day, they struggled to make ends meet. One year, in the hardest days of the Depression, they knew there would be no presents given at Christmas. They just had no money with which to buy them.

But Marjorie and Sam were determined to try to still make it a happy Christmas for their son, so they came up with an idea. Even though they couldn't buy gifts for each other, Sam said that they could make pictures of the presents they'd like to give each other and put the pictures on the tree.

And so they did. On their skimpy little tree, each of them privately put their pictures, and on Christmas morning, they all went over by the tree and looked at them. Marjorie and Sam had filled their pictures with wonderful, luxurious presents – a sleek car and a boat for Sam, a diamond bracelet and fur coat for Marjorie, and a camping tent and a swimming pool for Pete. They had dreamed big!

Then little Pete took his picture off of the tree and gave it to his parents. On it he had drawn a man, a woman and a child with their arms around each other laughing. And underneath the picture was one word, "US."

Tears filled Marjorie and Sam's eyes when they saw that of all the things Pete could have drawn, of all the things he could have dreamt for, he chose them. They were each other's greatest gifts.

Dear friends, may that little story be a reminder that of all the gifts we could ever receive, we've already received the greatest gift of all – Jesus Christ our Lord. And may it also be a reminder that, though we give gifts to all for whom we love and care, our first gift, our greatest love is Him. And there is only one gift that he wants from us, and that is, our hearts.

I pray that you have given your heart to Jesus, but if you haven't, maybe tonight is the night; and if you have, maybe tonight is the night you can tell him again that he is the Lord of your life, the gift you treasure most of all.

On this holy night, let me be silent now, and give you the opportunity to give him your heart, or to give it to him again, and thank him for the great gift he is in your life.

**SILENCE**

O Lord our God, thank you, thank you, thank you, for giving us everything we will ever need in Jesus. We treasure your most perfect gift on this most perfect night, and all the days and nights ahead. And we pray this prayer in his precious name. Amen.