

Gifts come in all shapes and forms
December 24, 2017 Sermon by Pastor Diana J. Perkins

What do you think about when you hear the word, “Christmas?” There are lots of words that describe the specialness of the event and children are a big part of the celebration in our family. The Bible tells us that children are our inheritance from the Lord. Read Psalms 127:3-5. These verses tell us that children are given to us as gifts from God and the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate. In the next Psalm it speaks about the happiness that comes by working with your hands to provide food for your table. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your home. Your children will be like olive plants around your table. Thus shall a man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Psalmist writes that it is God’s blessing when you see your children’s children.

It is quite puzzling to me that people celebrate Christmas without acknowledging that it represents the birth of Jesus, a special gift from God the Father to humanity. “Peace on earth goodwill to men.” Can you imagine having a birthday party and snubbing the person that is supposed to be the guest of honor? The birth of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift that the heavenly Father ever sent to this earth. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16. Think about this! God loved the world so much that he sent his best gift to earth so that we could all have an opportunity to have our sins forgiven and to be adopted into his heavenly family. Do you understand the benefits of being in his family? The Scripture says that “Eye has not seen, ears have not heard, neither has it entered into the hearts of men the things that God has in store for those who love him.”

1 Corinthians 2:9.

We must approach God as a child in order to receive his approval. Look at Matthew 18:1. The disciples came to Jesus and asked him who is the greatest in the kingdom of God. People are interesting because the desire to compete seems to be built into the hearts of men. They compete for the most expensive toys, homes, boats, economic status, and even compete for the most beautiful wife etc. The disciples were no different; they wanted the best seat in the kingdom of God. Look at Matthew 20:21. James and John, sons of Zebedee even put a bug in their mother’s ears what they wanted and she tried to secure it for them. Sound familiar? This mother would do anything for her sons and she came kneeling down in front of Jesus desiring to ask something of him that he alone could give. Jesus said, “What do you wish?” She answered, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit on your right hand and the other on the left in your kingdom.” Jesus told her that she didn’t understand what she was asking for. Jesus was aware of the price that he had to pay for the redemption of humanity and the road to Calvary was paved with cruelty,

humility, shame, and rejection. He willingly gave his life for the redemption of mankind, but even he asked that the cup pass from him if there was any other way. He would take the full measure of the wrath of his Father for the sins of the world upon his shoulder. He would bear the brunt of hatred from evil men, be publicly humiliated and hung on a wooden cross between two thieves. He would be mocked, scourged, and forced to carry his cross through the streets of Jerusalem though he was the King of Glory! No, he could not promise that these two men would sit next to him in his kingdom for the Father had kept that reward for those in whom he had preordained and prepared for.

Think about a child and the attributes of these sweet innocent babies. My great-grandson, Noah is nine months old. That baby is accepting of everybody. Whenever I see him and smile at him, he smiles and wants me to hold him. He holds my face in his hands and kisses me on the cheek. He snuggles in my arms and sings with me. He talks on the phone daily with me and what a wonderful child he is. His mother and grandmother accompanied me at the hospital last Sunday to sing Christmas carols. He allowed the nurses to snuggle him and they took him around to visit the patients. Noah was such a hit! He cooed, smiled, giggled and he put a smile on everyone's face. Unconditional love regardless of age, race, or religion, he just shined like a little star in the night.

I have a story to share with you. In the book "Doing Time with Charlie", written by his wife Kay, she wrote of an incident that brought joy and happiness to her husband, Charlie. As a prisoner, Charlie had gotten accustomed to being told what to do and where he was to be without any personal choices being considered. In prison for over 25 years, the life on the outside had long ago been set aside. He would never leave the prison as a free man. One of his favorite stories was about a trip that he made to Portland for an eye exam due to his diabetes. He was never told when or where he was going at any one time, just told to get dressed in orange for travel. The name of the prison was embroidered on the back of the shirt. He joked that it was in case he got lost along the way. The guards finished dressing him by putting a three point chain around his wrist, his belly and around his feet and the chains are all connected in case the person decides to take a jog without permission. Two guards accompanied him and one had a gun. When they arrived in Portland, they entered an elevator to get to the floor where an eye exam was to be administered. After being locked up for so many years, it is a very stressful experience to travel by car and an elevator ride was unnerving for him. After the visit, he entered the elevator with the two guards and a young lady entered also holding the hand of a young boy. Charlie wasn't allowed to start any conversation with anyone so he kept quiet, but just seeing a young boy meant a lot to him for it brought back memories of his young sons that he left behind many years ago. The child kept looking up at Charlie. Charlie thought the child was around four years old. Charlie was very tall and heavy set, and he thought the child would hurt his neck looking up the full height of him. The boy kept staring and his mother was polite. Charlie thought she might be both embarrassed and scared. She

looked away, probably hoping that the boy wouldn't say anything. It was quite obvious that Charlie was a prisoner and was being escorted by guards. The change in routine of travelling to an eye doctor outweighed any concern he had for the orange clothing and chains that was part of his attire. The next thing Charlie knew, the child strained his neck to see all the way to the top of Charlie's head. He looked like he wanted to say something and Charlie had decided that he would answer him if spoken to. The child looked like he was thinking deeply about something and then he said, "I know you." Charlie answered, "Oh, yeah?" The child's face beamed as he spoke, "Yup, you're Santa Claus." Charlie burst out laughing for he had not thought about the image that this precious child was getting from looking at his long white beard, mustache, and hair, his round body and the overall picture forming in the boy's mind. Both Charlie and the child burst out laughing as they both enjoyed the joke. Charlie retold that story over and over and every time that he told it, he went into a full-scale belly laugh. A gift from a child! Unconditional acceptance, kindness and a ray of sunshine to a man who suffered loss of everything that mattered to him because of one act of violence that cost him his freedom for the rest of his life. Whenever he told this story to visitors, everyone in the visiting room would burst out laughing! That child brought sunshine over and over again to all who heard Charlie tell of the boy who called him Santa! So many people looked on him as a monster, but this child reached out. I had known Charlie from childhood and he and I became friends.

What gifts do you share that brings hope, courage, or sunshine to others? We all have the capacity to give gifts; we have to consider what we can do to make others happy.

Leroy and I were shopping for gifts at Wal-Mart one day recently. Donations had come in for us to provide gifts for needy families so we had a cart full of bags and as we were leaving the store, an employee came up to me, gazed at our cart and quietly said, "Looks like you have gifts to give to your family this year. I can't shop for anything as all my money goes to pay the rent and to put food on my table. No, I won't be buying even one present for anyone." The comment took me by surprise and I said to her, "These packages are for needy children and kind people have donated money so we can help make Christmas a little bit brighter for them." She didn't have children so she didn't expect any gifts. There were so many people all around that I couldn't take the time to tell her what Christmas really means to me for she was busy watching for shop lifters, so I merely said that I was sorry but perhaps she could be thankful for her apartment and having a job that paid her bills. Many people are being housed in a homeless shelter this year. She nodded and smiled! I sensed loneliness and despair and asked God to open her eyes to his wonderful gift of his Son coming to this world.

Thinking of so many Bible characters who gave gifts to others is a wonderful exercise to do. I think of a little Jewish girl who had been taken into captivity by their enemy and was given to a woman for her maid. The story is in 2 Kings Chapter 5. The name, Naaman means pleasantness. He was a commander in the army of the king of Syria and

had many trophies for his courage and the ability to win battles for Syria, yet he became a leper. He would lose his life to a deadly disease without a miracle. Because of her unselfish act, Naaman's life was extended and he was healed of his affliction.

Jonathan, King Saul's son, dressed a shepherd boy named David in his own royal clothing. See 2 Samuel 1:26. They bonded as brothers and Jonathan was loyal to David and even desired to have David sit on the throne of his father rather than having it for himself. When Saul and Jonathan died in battle, David mourned over him and wrote that the love Jonathan showed towards him was wonderful, self-sacrificing and surpassed the love of women for Jonathan asked for nothing in return. He did everything in his power to protect David and to see that he gained the kingdom that Saul reigned over. Later David brought Jonathan's disabled son into the palace and treated him as his own flesh and blood and gave him the land that would have gone to his father. Jesus would come from this royal family. He would sit on the throne of his ancestor, King David.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, accepted the responsibility of bearing the Son of God regardless of how it would affect her future. She was considered an unwed mother, without the intervention of the angel of the Lord she would have sacrificed the marriage that she planned with her beloved Joseph, and there came a day when the sword pierced her heart just as Simeon had spoken in the temple when she brought the baby to be given to the LORD. Her heart was broken as she watched her beloved Son die a cruel, humiliating death upon a cross with two thieves on crosses beside of him. See Luke 2:35. It meant travelling to Bethlehem riding on a donkey at the end of her pregnancy, giving birth to a baby in a shelter filled with animals, fleeing from their home in order to protect the baby from the king's sword, and watching as people judged Jesus and even the chief priests warned people that Jesus was empowered by the ruler of devils. See Matthew 9:34. Yet this humble handmaiden of the Lord was promised that she would be called blessed among people, she would give birth to the Son of God and his name would be called Jesus for he would save his people from their sins. She saw his miracles, she witnessed his suffering, and she stood at the foot of the cross and listened to his last words. Jesus took care of his mother for he gave her to his beloved John to take care of for him. When the day of Pentecost had come, there was Mary among the 120 that received power from on high by the Holy Spirit falling on each of them. Mary was a faithful servant of God right to the end. Her obedience and self-sacrifice has been a model for all saints through the ages. This Christmas I hope that all of us will reach out to someone to give them courage, hope, faith, and charity. These gifts are life changing and they won't be thrown on the curbing to be taken to a landfill. They produce fruit that will be passed down from one generation to another and will keep the giver in memory years after they have been laid in the grave. Love is the greatest of gifts! Light overcomes darkness!