Sunday, November 26, 1978
A TIMELY GIFT (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: PRICELESS GIFTS)
Luke 10:38-42

We have entered the season of giving. That's what the advertisements tell us. That the ads really want us to enter is the season of buying, of spending. For many of us buying and giving go together. In our "thing- oriented" culture, we all too often equate buying with giving. Thus, the question on most people's mind is at this time of year, "Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?" Others ask, "I wonder what he or she bought me for my Christmas present."

All of us like to receive gifts, but maybe we have limited our definition of gifts and of giving when we think primarily of objects or things which can be bought. Such gifts often bring only temporary delight. Deep down we all know this; that's why we say at times, "It isn't the gift, it's the thought that counts." We want to believe that, yet I'm not so sure that we really believe it. Or it may depend on what kind of thought was behind the gift.

Some gifts are given simply because one feels obligated. It's the custom. Some gifts are given to relieve guilt. Then there is the gift that the giver himself really wants. Some gifts are bribes. Yet other gifts are given to show how powerful we are. One father, when his son turned 16, and was able to get a driver's license, gave his son a new Mercedes-Benz. Left with a feeling of inadequacy because of his own childhood encounter with poverty, the father needed to give his son, not transportation, but a status symbol. The boy would have preferred a car that didn't cause catcalls in the parking lot of the local high school.

Some gifts are given because of the newest fad. On their 15th wedding anniversary, a husband gave his wife an expensive imported food processor. The machine was used twice and now it stands neatly covered with plastic in the cupboard under the kitchen sink. Our homes are filled with gadgets and small appliances and machines which we seldom use but love to possess.

Giving gifts is not as easy as it first seems. We live in a time that emphasizes self-gratification. It is an age of narcissism. According to Greek mythology, Narcissus was a youth who caused the death of Echo, by spurning her love. Narcissus could only love himself. Attempts to involve him in a relationship with other people would inevitably be thwarted by his excessive self-concern.

He could've written the book "Looking Out For No. One!" which is so popular in our time. "Concentrate on looking out for Number One. I'm sure you have enough problems of your own without worrying about helping others..." (quotation from "Looking Out For No. One," by R. Ringer)

"Now you know that being right truly doesn't matter-- winning your game is what counts."

Now of course it is important for people to get in touch with their feelings, and healthy for us to know who we are. We need to be self-accepting, and not self-punishing, to take responsibility for our actions and to continue to learn and to grow. Taking care of our own needs can help us grow, but the line between enough and too much is a narrow one, since taking care of our own needs at the expense of other can make us shrink.

A very old story is about a man who was planting a carob tree. A passerby asked him why he was taking the time and effort to plant the tree, since the fruit would take at least seventy years to mature. The man replied, “I found the world provided with carob trees because my ancestors planted them for me. I am now planting them for my children.”

We don’t know what the passerby answered, but if this in-cident happened in our time, the response might be: “What a fool thing to do. Why don’t you take care of yourself? Look out for No. 1! You could make some jewelry out of those carob seeds so that you would be dressed very fancy when you go out. Later generations can worry about themselves, and if they aren’t happy about it when they grow up, they can always see a psychologist!”

Narcissus was almost the direct opposite of the kind of person our Christian faith describes as the ideal. Jesus Christ taught and lived that the deepest joy and meaning in life comes from living a life filled with giving, loving, and caring.

So, during the season of preparation for Christmas, we are going to be talking about some priceless gifts which we all can give; some gifts that are not objects and which cannot be bought at any price — some gifts you may not have thought about.

In the first sermon in this series, let me suggest an appropriate gift for those you love; a gift especially to be desired and appreciated during the time leading up to Christmas.

This priceless gift is the gift of “time.” To give time to those you love can be the most beautiful and most remembered gift of all. Time for most of us is a precious commodity. It is a non-renewable resource; once a moment is spent, it has gone on to join all those other moments we call the past.

The gift of time! Over and over again, I have heard parents lament the fact, and particularly fathers, that they didn’t give their children the gift of time, particularly when the children were young.

One divorced man after 20 years of marriage described a movie scene which deeply affected him. The scene shows the end of a big Saturday outing where a father has taken his son hiking, bowling and. Picnicking — everything the child had always wanted them to do together. About to be dropped off at home, the boy says, “It’s really much better having you and mom separated.” When the father asks why, the boy replies, “Well you know how you’re always so busy and worried about your work and making up lists of everything you have to do. And now I’ve finally made your list.”

Just recently a counselor was telling me about a nine-year-old boy he was working with who had a severe behavior problem at school, in his neighborhood and at home. In school, he was restless, fidgety, and seemed not to be much interested in learning. In the neighborhood, he was irritable and got into many fights with younger children. At home, he was negative and crabby and frequently complained about being sick.

His father was a successful lawyer and had little time to spend with the boy. The mother was busy fulfilling herself and had become a full-time student at the university. The house was cared for by a series of housekeepers, none of which stayed at the job very long.

Sometimes the parents, feeling a bit guilty about the lack of time spent with their son, would arrange a quick overnight trip to one of the several amusement parks, like “Worlds-of-Fun” in

Kansas City. During such a weekend, they would buy their son almost everything he wanted in a frantic attempt to atone for their lack of time during the rest of the year.

After months of counseling, the parents came to understand how badly their son wanted some of their time. They came to understand that his frequent stomachaches were not stomachaches at all but were really emotional aches. Unconsciously the boy knew all along that if he were sick, his parents would show care and give him time — and so he was on the road to becoming a chronic hypochondriac.

In a sense, he had to earn his parents time with him through his sickness. They were not giving him their time as a gift. After a while, when both parents started to spend more time with him, a marked change occurred. He complained less and became more pleasant to be with. As he became more agreeable, his parents began to enjoy him more and desired to spend more time with him. His work in school improved and he began to play well with his friends. The gift of time, freely given, can work miracles.

Another couple, both age 30, are having trouble with their son who is a year old. He is teething and wakes up crying during the night. The mother has to play tennis early in the morning, and she can't play well if she loses sleep. She calls her doctor to ask for a prescription to help her son sleep. Her doctor tells her he doesn't want to prescribe anything. She changes pediatricians.

The gift of time is appreciated by anyone at any age. And it's not only the quantity of time we give to those we love, but the quality of time. A favorite poster of mine says, "DO ONE THING AT A TIME AND BE ALL THERE WHEN YOU DO IT."

The story we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke, is in large part a story about the giving and receiving of the gift of time. Martha literally thought she had no time to stop her busyness to just be present with her guest, and she didn't want her sister Mary to have that kind of time to give either. It sounds like many of us during the season preceding Christmas.

When Martha complained to Jesus that she was having to do all the work, he replied, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things." It was his way of saying, "Take some time, let me give you some of my time, relax, just be for a while."

Martha needed to give herself some time. Always rushing about accomplishing little and often leads to time pressure A recent survey conducted among middle-class married women, indicated that the sources of depression which most often sent them into despair and gloom were time pressure and fatigue.

This holiday season, give yourself some time to relax and just be with those you love. They want your time more than they want the objects or other things you are rushing around to buy and prepare.

Martha also needed to give her sister Mary the gift of time. She needed to let Mary alone and not rush her into some other activity. In any caring relationship, it is important for us to give those we love this kind of gift of time as well. This means not just giving them our time, not just our being with them, but giving them time for themselves, time to be alone, time to be with others, time to do what that person needs to do, time to adjust to change.

Each one of us has a different rhythm in our lives. Some of us need more time than others. Some need more time to be alone. Some of us need more time to work through our grief than others. Some of us need more time to heal after being hurt. Some of us need more time to grow. Some need more time to learn. The gift of time — what a precious thing.

One husband, for example, was initially very sympathetic with his wife when her mother died. Having always had an extremely close relationship with her mother, Helen, age35, was shocked and almost numb after she learned that her mother had died suddenly.

During the funeral, and for a couple of weeks afterward, Helen's husband was concerned and understanding. After three weeks had passed, however, and Helen's grief did not seem to lift, her husband became gruff and harsh. "Why don't you snap out of it? It's gone on too long," he demanded. "If I could, I would!" Let me alone. I just can't get over it yet, "she replied. Frustrated and angered by his own inability to relieve his wife's grief, he became sullen and remorse. He did not give her the time that she needed to mourn the death of her mother.

The gift of time is precious. It's a gift each one of us can give. It's the gift that God also continually gives to us. Jesus Christ was in Martha's home, wanting to give her the gift of his time. All she had to do was to stop her busyness and accept it.

This coming Advent Season, as you prepare for Christmas, and throughout the year, give the gift of time.