Book 8

Sunday December 3, 1978

"A GIFT WE ALL NEED" John 13:3-5, 12-17
(second in a series on priceless gifts)

Text: John 13:15 "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

A few months ago, I was trying to be of some help to a young woman who was anxious and afraid of almost everything. She worried about doing a good job where she worked. She worried if people would like her. She worried about getting sick. She even worried about being worried all the time. During one of our conversations she said, "I think I'm just like my mother. She worries just the way I do. Do you think I learned it from her?"

"Yes," I replied, "Perhaps you did." Many of our emotional attitudes are learned, not so much by what others tell us, but by a process of imitating someone we respect or love.

This young woman had learned from her mother to see the scary possibilities in every new situation. When she was young and would go to a birthday party, she remembered her mother anxiously asking whether there were any children there who had colds. When she was a bit older and took swimming lessons, she recalled her mother would usually be more interested in whether the pool was properly supervised than in finding out how much the girl had learned.

As a teen-ager, she was scared by her mother's stories of girls who were raped because they stayed out too late or went to parties when the parent's weren't home. The daughter naturally imitated her mother from little on up; she observed and unconsciously she modeled herself after her mother. The problem was that in many ways the mother in this case was not a very good example to follow.

On the other hand, the mother could've given the daughter a most valuable gift--the gift of a good example. It's a gift we all need and it's a gift that each one of us can give to others. It's also a gift that can be longer lasting than almost any other gift that can be given to those we love.

Now of course, being a model for other people's behavior is a big responsibility, but it's a responsibility none of us can escape. Like it or not, good example or bad

example, other people are influenced by our example, and this is especially true of those closest to us, and most true of our children when they are young and impressionable.

A few years ago, a noted psychologist conducted an experiment that has since become a classic. Dr. Solomon Asch, at Princeton University, would ask a student to judge the length of a line. When the student was surrounded by others who expressed the judgment that the line was longer than it actually was, the student tended to see the line as being longer. When the student was exposed to opinions that the line was shorter, he or she tended to judge the line as being shorter. The students did not consciously realize that their own judgment of the line was being affected by the judgment of others. But it was!

Each one of us has the ability to give the gift of a good example. Think about your own behavior for a minute! How do you treat people? The way we treat people is most often learned from having imitated or followed the example of someone we respect or love. Also, think for a moment, who do you remember most fondly from the past? For most of us it will be a person who set a good example for us, a person who gave us that precious gift.

What the disciples remembered most about Jesus and what affected them the most was the example he set for them. According to the Gospel of John, during the evening of the last supper with his disciples, before his trial and crucifixion, Jesus got up from the table and prepared to wash the feet of his disciples. And when he had finished washing their feet, he said to them, "If I then your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." It was an example of course of more than washing one another's feet; it was an example of being a servant to one another.

"I have given you an example," said Jesus. There are so many gifts of good examples one can give. Parents can give their children the gift of a good example in their religious life. How we prepare for and celebrate Christmas can be the gift of a good example. Children will learn more about the love of God from us as parents than from anyone.

The gift of a good example. When Reinhold Niebuhr, who was one of this country's greatest theologians and thinkers, was 10 years old, he told his father who was a minister that he too wanted to become a minister. When his father asked him why, he replied, "Because you're the most interesting man in town."

Think of the many gifts of a good example you can give to those you love. You can be quite poor financially, but you can give the gift of a good example. You can give the gift of a good example in how to deal with anger, how to deal with disappointment and failure. You can give the give the gift of the good example of patience. The list is almost endless.

This Advent and Christmas season, choose something in your life wherein you want to be a better example. You can give that gift all through the coming year. It can be the best and most priceless gift you have ever given anyone. Amen.