Sunday, December 17, 1978
A MOST UNUSUAL GIFT (NO. 4 IN A SERIES: PRICELESS GIFTS)
Mark 14:3-9

Most of us at one time or another have been the recipient of a surprising, unexpected, impulsive gift. Such gifts can be the most meaningful and treasured of all that we have received. Sometimes these surprising impulsive gifts are not very practical but are even more beautiful because of their impracticality.

Jesus Christ received just such a gift one day. And it couldn't have been given to him at a more appropriate time. It was two days before the Passover Fest and just a few days before his coming arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The giver of the impulsive, impractical gift did not know how appropriate the gift was.

Here's what happened. Jesus was staying at the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany, and following the meal, while he was still sitting at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. WE don't know who the woman was, her name is not mentioned. We don't even know if she was one of the guests for the meal. Perhaps she came in off the street.

She opened the jar of very expensive ointment and poured it on the head of Jesus. Biblical scholars estimate that the ointment was probably worth in today's dollars about $240, or more.

According to the story, Jesus was deeply impressed by this extravagant action. He was moved by her unmeasured generosity, her self-forgetfulness, her devotion. She hadn't stopped to calculate. She didn't pour out a few drops and think, "Well, I guess that ought to be enough for his occasion. No need to get carried away with my giving." She was lifted clear out of herself in her act of devotion. Her unblocked impulse moved Jesus — the spontaneity of it. Indeed, it was a beautiful thing to do. It was to say the least, an unusual gift.

But it's not her unusual gift in this story that I want to talk about this morning. There's another side to this story. The unusual gift the woman gave to Jesus was not the only gift given in that occasion. Jesus also gave this woman a most unusual and precious gift. It was the gift of letting her give to him! He gave her a gift in the way in which he received her gift.

Here is a gift we usually don't think much about. The gift of letting others give to us. It can be one of the most important gifts we ever give.

The others in the house of Simon the Leper at Bethany that day were not able to give that gift to the woman who poured the expensive ointment on the head of Jesus. They would've stopped her act of impulsive devotion if they had had the chance. "She shouldn't have done it," they said. They thought it was a dumb thing to do.

They could only see the generous act of love as waste. Is the giving of love ever a waste? "The ointment should've been sold and then the proceeds given to the poor." That's what they said. Although people who make such statements are not usually those who give much of their own money to the poor. Exchange the ointment for something real and worthwhile — exchange it for money — that's the only real thing in this world. That was their opinion. Gifts and acts of love and devotion are not as real or valuable.

Haven't we done the same thing at times? Someone who loves us and wants to give us a beautiful gift does so, and our immediate response is, "You shouldn't have done it. It's much too expensive." Sometimes, we find it difficult to give the gift of letting others give to us. We do not give the gift of graciously receiving their gift. Instead, and often without being aware of it, we reproach the one who has given us a beautiful and surprising gift.

Children are often the best at giving unusual, impulsive, unexpected gifts and they work so hard at trying to do their best in giving us those gifts. But we need to give them a gift in return — the gift of letting them give to us. Sometimes it is better not to ask any questions, but just graciously and thankfully receive the gift, lest the giver misunderstand.

One mother had been sick in bed for several days and her daughter decided to make her some hot tea to make her feel better. It was to be a surprise. The six-year-old brought the tea into the bedroom and then waited as her mother drank it, so that she could be properly congratulated for her good deed. Her mother drank the tea and then asked the little girl how she went about making the tea. "Just like you do, mommy," replied the girl, "First I take the tea leaves and boil them, and then I strained them," she went on. "When did you use to strain them with?" asked the mother. "Oh," replied the girl, "I couldn't find the strainer, so I used the fly swatter." Sensing that she had said and done something wrong by the look on her mother's face, she tried to put her mother's mind at ease. "Oh, I didn't use the new fly swatter," she reassured her mother. "I used the old one."

The gift of letting others give to us, is sometimes one of the most difficult of all gifts to give. Yet in spite of the difficulty, the giving of this gift can be one of the most important that we ever give. The giving of this gift not only does something for others, but it also does something for us.

1. First of all, in this very complex world of ours, it often takes humility on our part to give this gift.

Some people are very isolated and feel superior, live in a tower of pride and therefore come to believe they don't need anything from anyone. Thus, they are very comfortable when they can give to others for it reinforces their feeling of superiority. And this doesn't mean they should stop their giving. They need to learn however how to let others give to them.

There was a physician who was probably the most respected member of the medical community in the town in which he lived and practiced medicine. Other doctors, if they encountered a particularly difficult case, would send their patients to this man for consultation. One day, one of the other doctors in the hospital noticed that this very respected physician was not looking as well as he should. He mentioned this to his colleague, and he acknowledged that he hadn't been feeling well. His friend then suggested that he would welcome the opportunity to be of whatever help he could to the man. "Thank you for your interest," replied the respected physician in a rather brusque manner, "but I'm a senior man on this staff and I can look after myself."

Several months later, he died of an illness which if it had been treated in time, would have been cured. So used to giving, this man could not accept the thought of receiving. After the funeral, his friend who had tried to be of help kept asking, "Why didn't he let me or someone help him?" He could not give the gift of letting others give to him. It takes a certain kind of humility on our part to give the gift of letting others give to us.

2. Secondly, when we give the gift of letting others give to us, we may times are giving in addition, the gift of a growing sense of self-confidence to the one giving the gift to us.

There was a man who was planning to convert the basement of his house into a den. He was going to hire a friend of his who was a carpenter to do the work. This friend specialized in remodeling basements. The 17-year-old son who was rather handy with tools, pleaded with his father to be allowed to do the job. “I can do it,” he said. “If I run into problems, I can always speak to your friend the carpenter.” The father finally decided to give his son the chance to give the family the gift of his work on finishing the basement, providing the son would accept advice from the experienced carpenter, if needed.

The carpenter was contacted and agreed to supervise the alteration of the basement. So, every few days he came by to see how the young man was doing. And you know what? He did just fine! The completed basement was certainly not as well-finished as if the carpenter had done the work. Some of the nails were a bit crooked, and there were a few hammer marks on the paneling.

But by allowed the son to give him the gift of construction, the father had given the boy the even more important gift of the feeling of a job well done: the gift of letting others give to us.

A story in the newspapers some time ago told about a retired minister in Texas, who also gave the gift of letting others give. His wife, who had been a widow when he married her shortly before his retirement, was a light sleeper and occasionally left the house early in the morning and got hopelessly lost. She then turned herself over to the nearest law enforcement officer to be taken home. The minister had suffered a fall and had to walk on crutches and couldn’t drive his car. Also because of the medicine he was taking, he slept too soundly and often didn’t noticed when his wife left the house early in the morning on her walks. Since she had gotten lost frequently, the police finally warned the minister that something had to be done.

The wife had become friends with the children next door, and they had always been wanting to be of help. The minister did not know that the children, ages 8, 10, and 11, had been in trouble for their malicious mischief and for running away from home. The older two were in fact on court-ordered probation. But since they wanted to be of help, he let them come over early each morning to be companions for his wife.

Gradually, as they kept coming each morning, they began to change. So did the minister’s wife. She began to bake again and to play the piano. Buttonless coats and torn blouses appeared in her basket. Her memory seemed to improve. So did her housekeeping. She asked her husband for guidance books that her young friends could read. She insisted that they bring their homework with them when they visited so that she could help them. The picked flowers for her, made vases and pencil holders and formed wear and hose. The mother of the three children couldn’t believe the change in them. At school their grades improved and so did their conduct.

Both the three children and the minister’s wife were giving and receiving the gift of letting others give to them and a miracle was taking place in their lives.

This unusual gift of letting others give to us ranges far and wide. Sometimes we need to give others the opportunity to give so that they can atone for some of things they have done wrong.

Most of us, as we go through life, do some things we are not proud of. We hurt other people at times, sometimes on purpose and at other times inadvertently. If we have a conscience, then we feel the need to put things right by making restitution after we have hurt or wronged someone. In return they need to give the gift of letting us give to them. And if we are the ones who have been hurt, then we need to give the gift of letting others give to us.

An apology is a gift and how we receive it can be a gift in return.

My friends, especially during the Christmas season, each one of us can give the precious gift of letting others give to us.