Sunday, December 24, 1978
A VERY PERSONAL GIFT (NO. 5 IN A SERIES: PRICELESS GIFTS)
Hebrews 1:1-3; John 1:14-18

A man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years came home from work to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke that day. She was rushed to the hospital, but in spite of the best available medical attention, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband in shock and grief told his best friend, “Do you know what the worst thing is of all about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this whole world and I was never able to tell her. I was never one to disclose my feelings very much.”

It’s an all too familiar story! We often withhold one of the most precious gifts that we can give. It is the gift of “self-disclosure.” Love is most often given and received through the self-disclosure of one person to another. It’s a very personal gift — because to disclose ourself to another is to give them a part of ourself.

There was once a young boy who never talked. He was normal in all other ways. He just never said a word to anyone. His parents were not even sure that he could talk. They took him to psychologists and to psychiatrists. The doctors could find nothing wrong. They took him to speech therapists and throat specialists. Again, nothing could be found to explain his silence. One day when he was about eleven years old, he looked up from the breakfast table and said to his mother, “The oatmeal is cold!” His mother was astounded to hear her son speak. After she recovered from the shock of hearing him talk the first time, she said, “Son, you can talk. Why, Oh why haven’t you ever said anything before?” “Because before this,” he replied, “everything was always O.K.”

But everything’s not always O.K. if we aren’t able to give the gift of self-disclosure; if we aren’t able to let others know what we like and dislike, what excited us and what makes us sad. Human relationships either grow, expand and deepen, or they become stale and decline. The gift of self-disclosure, letting someone else discover more about us, can turn a declining relationship into a flourishing one. The more we disclose ourselves to others, the more others can respond to us.

The gift of self-disclosure is the most personal gift of all, and it helps satisfy one of the deepest human needs.

We now know that the basic human drive, the basic appetite, the deepest desire of each one of us is not self-preservation — that is too much biological. The basic human drive is not sex, nor pleasure, or any of the other things we often like to think — although all of these are related to the deepest desire of all. What every human being seeks in life is “meaning,” a “why” for living. He or she who has a “why for living,” can bear with any “how.” Each one of us wants something that will give meaning, purpose and direction to our living.

We seek to find this meaning and purpose, this “why” for our living in many ways. Some seek to find it in pleasure, others in sex, others in power, or in gaining wealth, or in their work, or by becoming famous.

But as Christians, we believe that the only true and lasting and satisfying meaning and purpose n life comes from our relationships with other human beings and from our relationship with God and these are connected with each other. If we say we love God and hate other

human beings, we are a liar, says the Bible. We best express our love for God by loving one another. So, a person's life begins to lose meaning, purpose and direction most often and most rapidly when he or she becomes estranged from other human beings, particularly those who are closest to us. On the other hand, we are happiest and most secure when we have healthy relationships with others. Even our physical health is better.

To put it another way, the deepest desire of all of us is to be at-one with someone and to have someone be at-one with us and through such relationships to be at-one with all and with God. This is the harmony we all seek, and it is the only things which gives satisfying and lasting meaning to our lives.

The gift of self-disclosure goes a long way in helping us have growing and loving relationships with others and with God. It is necessary for obtaining that harmony with others and with God. As we disclose ourselves to others, we invite them into our lives. As we disclose ourselves to God, we invite God into our lives. To gift the gift of self-disclosure is to be open to other human beings and to God.

However, to give the gift or self-disclosure, to be open in our relationships, to let others see our weaknesses as well as our strengths, is not always easy. It can be a difficult gift to give.

In our culture, "playing it cool," is thought by many to be the best way to live. Don't let your guard down. Don't let others know your weak spots. Keep a poker face, a stiff upper lip. This idea is based partly on the mistaken notion that if others know something about us, they will use that knowledge to hurt or harm us. And sometimes it might turn out that way. But the gift of self-disclosure to those we love is worth the risk. For only as we disclose ourselves to others and are open to them, can they love us in return.

There was a man who owned a successfully printing shop for many years. One day a new print shop opened a few blocks away. Many of this person's customers were attracted to the new shop by lower prices and soon he found that his profits were declining. He felt awful about the competition, and he began to feel frightened about his ability to successfully meet this new threat.

He would often return home from work in a depressed mood. His wife wanted to know what the problem was, but he found it difficult to disclose to her that he was just plain scared. So, he didn't say much at all. The wife, not knowing what the silence was all about, began to mistakenly assume that her husband was seeing another woman. Because of his inability to give the gift of self-disclosure, he now had two problems instead of one. If he had told his wife about his fears, together they could have begun to deal with them. She was the kind of person who wanted to be of help to the man she loved, but he wouldn't let her. By his refusal to give the gift of self-disclosure, she could not give him the gift of her understanding in return.

The gift of self-disclosure lets others know more about us and as they come to know us better, they can be of help to us and can love us more deeply.

There's an added dividend when we give the gift of self-disclosure — we come to know ourselves better as we openly disclose ourselves to others who we love. No one can know himself or herself very well except as we begin to disclose ourselves to others. When we give the gift of self-disclosure in an accepting, loving relationship, we come to see ourselves as in a mirror — the process of telling and re-telling and revealing helps us to understand who we are and what we think and feel.

Thus far we have been talking primarily about giving the gift of self-disclosure to those we love — to other human beings, and it is the most personal gift we can give. But there's another dimension of self-disclosure which is also needed. We need to disclose ourselves to God and also to accept God's self-disclosure toward us.

Now disclosing ourselves to God, does not let God know any more about us than God already knows, but it does open us to receive God's own self-disclosure into our lives. That's what Christmas is all about.

Christmas can best be described as God's self-disclosure! The writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way — "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers and mothers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son..." Or as John's gospel puts it — "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

It is God's self-disclosure! What are some of the things Christmas discloses about God?

1. First, God's self-disclosure at Christmas tells us that God often enters our world unobtrusively, gently, quietly and in places and time when we least expect it.

What could be more gently than God entering the world in a baby born in Bethlehem — an out of the way place. There was no room at the inn, says the Bible, and God didn't force his way. That's what God is like, if we don't make room for God in our lives, God doesn't use force, but goes where there is room, whether it be the stable or anywhere.

And that's the way love is. Love doesn't force its way into a person's life. If something is forced, it's not love but something else.

The song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" expresses God's self-disclosure very well. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So, God imparts to human hearts the blessing of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

The gift of our self-disclosure, like the Gift of God's self-disclosure is best given when done gently and unobtrusively. We can't force ourselves into anyone's life.

2. Secondly, like our self-disclosure to others, God's self-disclosure comes most often in the common events of life and not in the sensational. Think of it! The coming of God in the flesh was in a baby, the same way we all enter the world. It was no great events as far as the world knew. Two people, Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. They are no different from other travelers. And the birth of a baby. It happens every day in all parts of the world. God's self-disclosure is in the common everyday happenings of life.

So, Christmas says that God still works, not in the spectacular, or what we call the miraculous, or in the sensational, or in the famous; rather God works quietly, faithfully in common-place events, in birth and death. And we most often disclose ourselves to others in the common everyday happenings.

Too often we are only impressed by bigness, by outward show of power, by the noise and the sensational, by the boisterous and the bizarre, by the Caesars and the Napoleons, by Generals and armies and hydrogen bombs, by television personalities and celebrity Christians.

In so doing we may miss the self-disclosure of God. Christmas says that God comes in the ordinary and the common.

St. Paul wrote: God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise; God has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong. God has chosen things of little repute and little strength, yes, and even things which have no real existence to explode the pretensions of the things that are."

3. Thirdly, God's self-disclosure is most often personal. In Christ, God comes to us in a person. When something is personal, then we can begin to understand it. I can give the gift of self-disclosure through a photograph, through writing notes or letters, through my ideas, but when I am present with someone I love personally, there's a difference.

And this is true of all life. Ideas are poor things until they are incarnate — until we see and experience them in the flesh. Did you ever fall in love with unselfishness? Of course not! What we fall in love with is not unselfishness, but unselfish people. It is when an idea becomes incarnate that it is truly revealed.

The Christmas story says that God became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Now we know more what God is like and what's God's love is like. The gift of God's self-disclosure at Christmas tells us there really is a Divine Presence which invades our lives and our world. All we have to do is to be open to it. And the more we give the gift of self-disclosure to others, the more open we are to receiving the gift of the self-disclosure of God.

This not always an easy step to take, but it is a glorious step. To make room for God's love in our lives means some other things have to go. Our hates, our prejudices, our old way of looking at the world and judging people — that's why so many reject God's self-disclosure — they want to keep things as they are. They do not want to make room in the inn.

This Christmas, give the gift of self-disclosure, give the gift of your real self to those you love. Tell them how much you love them, how much you care for them, and at the same time you will be making room in your life for God's self-disclosure. Amen.