Sunday, December 2, 1979
THE GIFT OF SILENCE (No. 1 in a Series: Gifts)
Ecclesiastes 3:1,7; John 15:12-17, 16:12

The season of Christmas is a time of gifts. It is also a season of buying, for in our culture, we usually buy the gifts we intend to give. Last year in this season. Therefore, we did a series of sermons on gifts we can all give which cannot be bought anywhere, and today and on the next three Sundays we are going to continue that series.

Some of the best gifts we can give to another are personal gifts that cannot be bought anywhere. Last year, for example, I suggested that we give the ones we love the gift of "time," the gift of a "good example," the gift of seeing the best in others, the gift of "letting others give to us," and the gift of "self-disclosure."

This Advent and Christmas season, I want to suggest some additional gifts which cannot be bought, but which are very personal and precious. This morning I want to suggest that you consider giving the gift of silence.

There's a wrong kind of silence and a right kind of silence. I'm not suggesting for example that you give someone the "silent treatment," like ignoring someone who wants your attention, nor am I suggesting that our anger toward someone be the silent kind so that the person we are angry with does not know what we are angry about.

There is a gift of silence which is positive, and the Bible has a lot to say about it. "Be still (that is, be silent) and know that I am God." "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him." Sometimes we can only know and experience God after we've been silent for a time.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to keep silence and a time to speak." An important lesson for us all to remember.

Jesus Christ knew the importance of a time to keep silence and a time to speak. When he was beginning to tell his disciples about his coming trial, death and resurrection, he knew there was only so much that he could tell them at one time; only so much they could understand, so he said to them, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Perhaps later on you will be able to understand, so for the time being it is better for me to keep silent.

The gift of silence. As I was preparing this sermon, I became amazed at how often silence is related to Christmas. Some of the best loved Christmas carols speak of the importance of silence. "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." Each verse of the beautiful carol begins the same way — "Silent night, holy night."

Listen to the third verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given, so God imparts to human hearts, the blessings 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."

Another Christmas carol in the first verse has these words, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand."

The gift of silence can be golden, particularly when we live in such a noisy world. We live with so much noise that we tend to think of silence as the absence of noise, and thus for some silence is a negative experience rather than a positive one.

We have so little silence in our lives that when it comes to us, we do not always know what to do with this beautiful gift.

Giving the gift of silence recognizes the fact that sometimes words to not need to be spoken, our presence can be enough. Sometimes too, we speak too soon, and without much thought and then our words can be more of a hindrance than a help. You've heard the saying, "Sometimes it is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt," "Or when you argue with a fool, be sure he or she is not similarly engaged."

The gift of silence. During this noisy and busy holiday season, take some time each day just to be quiet, to be silent. Give this gift to yourself and then give it to others.

There are so many ways in which this gift can be given. To the young people here, give your parents the gift of silence this season. And to those of us who are older, let us not be too quick to give advice, sometimes it's better to be silent and wait for the right time to speak. When someone has hurt us, or when we want to speak too quickly because we are sure that our criticism would straighten out someone, first give the gift of silence. One can always speak, but once words are spoken, they cannot be retracted.

Even when the words we want to speak are true and come from good motivations, many times it is better to remain silent. As Jesus reminds us, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Sometimes what we have to say is too much for others to bear at that time. Sometimes too, we make our point and then keep on talking.

We can also give the gift of silence by being silent and listening carefully to wha.t others have to say — often we want to respond too quickly with words of our own. We can give the gift of silence by not becoming defensive when someone says something to us that we take as criticism.

There's a prayer called "Prayer for the Middle-aged," which implies giving the gift of silence to others around us.

The gift of silence is especially important in our relationship to God as well as in our relationship to others. Sometimes it takes a lot of silence before we can hear God — "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." God enters our world and our lives in unobtrusive ways. Being silent is one way of being open to God's entrance.

There's a lot of silence connected with Holy Communion. Here in addition to words, God speaks to us with elements we can see, touch and taste. This morning let the Communion elements represent God silently entering your life this Christmas season, and then go from here and be ready to give the gift of silence to others. Amen.

(addition to sermon for 11:00 a.m. worship)

Sometimes the gift of silence can indicate a beautiful and deep relationship. A professor wrote, "I vividly remember the day on which a man who had been my student in one of my courses

came back to school and entered by room with the disarming remark: ‘I have no problems this time, no questions to ask you. I do not need counsel or advice, but I simply want to celebrate sometime with you.’ We sat on the ground facing each other and talked a little bit about what life had been for us in the last year, about our work, our common friends, and about the restlessness of our hearts. Then slowly as minutes passed by, we became silent. Not an embarrassing silence, but a silence that could bring us closer together than the many small and big events of the last year. We would hear a few cars pass and the noise of someone who was emptying a trash can somewhere. But that did not hurt. The silence which grew between us was warm, gentle, and vibrant. Once in a while we looked at each other with the beginning of a smile pushing away the last remnants of fear and suspicion. It seemed that while the silence grew deeper around us, we became more and more aware of a presence embracing both of us. Then he said, ‘It is good to be here,’ and I said, ‘Yes, it is good to be together again.’ And after that we were silent again for a long period. As a deep peace filled the empty space between us, he said, hesitantly. ‘When I look at you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ.’ I did not feel startled, surprised or in need of protesting, but I could only say, ‘It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘He is in our midst,’ and then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years, ‘From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.’” Amen.