Sunday, December 9, 1979
THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING (No. 2 in a Series: Gifts)
Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Matthew 7:1-5

There's one gift which I hope a lot of us who call ourselves followers of Christ will be giving and receiving this Christmas and long after, and that is the gift of understanding. It seems to be in short supply in today's world, and the more tense our world becomes the shorter the supply of understanding.

The gift of understanding, however, is something we Christians can all have a hand in producing and giving away. The gift of understanding is difficult to define, but it can easily be recognized when someone gives it to us. Jesus Christ had and gave to others understanding and he also gave some very specific instructions on how to become an understanding person so that we have the gift to give to others.

Here's part of what he had to say on the subject: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." And then Jesus went on to say, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's or sister's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother or sister, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the long in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Part of becoming an understanding person so that we have the gift to give to others is to be able as clearly as possible to see our own faults before we begin to point out the faults of others. Jesus knew that most of us have the tendency to minimize our own faults and at the same time. magnify the faults of others.

1. So in the first place, giving the gift of understanding includes being able to see our own faults, being able to deal with the log in our own eye.

This matter of being able to see our own faults applies to groups, to organizations, to churches and to nations as well as to individuals. Another way of saying it is to be able as much as possible to see ourselves as others see us.

Take the crisis with Iran as an example. Imagine for a moment that you are a young person in that country. Some of your friends and relatives were among those tortured, put in prison and put to death while the Shah was ruler of the country.

You are also aware that the Shah was returned to power by an American CIA engineered coup in 1953, and since that time used his own SAVAK secret police to rule by oppressive methods which required the detention of perhaps as many as 100,000 political prisoners.

The Shah was understood as a kind of extension of this country's power over another country. When we try to see it from an Iranian point of view, it's not too difficult to see why many Iranians hold a grudge against the Shah and against this country. And as far as getting a mob worked up, that's not very difficult even in this country. There are Americans who almost froth at the lips because they don't like the way Howard Cose11 talks on TV. During the world series, a mob of fans smashed his car and tried to maul him because his comments didn't satisfy them. So, if we can go berserk over a sportscaster's evil ways, it's understandable that

some Iranians might feel resentful about someone who tortured or murdered their friends or relatives and then fled the country with billions of dollars of their wealth.

Lest anyone misunderstand, this attempt at seeing ourselves as others see us, of trying to see the log in our own eye, is not in any way to condone the taking of American hostages at our embassy in Iran. This kind of action violates a fundamental principle of modern diplomacy. Heretofore, even when nations have been involved in wars with one another, the sanctity of International diplomatic rules has been honored. Without such accepted practices of civilized behavior, nations and individuals fall back into barbarism. So whatever grievances the people of Iran have against the Shah, does not justify the present action.

On our part it takes tremendous patience and understanding. Our situation is analogous to that of a police captain dealing with a crazed robber who threatens to kill all his hostages unless he gets both his money and his freedom.

Having and giving the gift of understanding also includes not overreacting in ways that might be detrimental to innocent people, but some are already overreacting. Note these recent news items:

Mr. James LaFante, who is president of the Hudson County New Jersey Bus Owner's Association recently said, "When I go into a restaurant now and I find Iranian workers, I tell the owner to fire them, and if he won't, then I walk out of that restaurant and spread the word not to eat there." Mr. LaFante is also part of a movement that has thus far fired six Iranian bus drivers from their jobs. He told the newspaper that he had decided to act even before the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service began to examine the standing of Iranian nationals for possible deportation.

Flag dealers are reporting a run on Iranian flags purchased by Americans who want to burn them. In our frustration, we have to be careful not to overreact, for that's exactly what some Iranians did in their frustration. They over-reacted by taking hostages.

More than anything else in this present situation, we need the gift of understanding which includes seeing the login our own eye. This does not in any way mean that we condone or excuse the action of the Iranians in taking hostages.

2. A second element which is part of gaining understanding so that we have it to give, is learning to listen before we respond too quickly. This is particularly important in our personal relationships as well as in our relation-ships of groups to other groups.

It's not always easy to listen to others when they talk. We don't want to hear their gripes and complaints and excuses. All too often we interrupt so as to get our message across. We see the speck in their eye and want to get it out and again miss the log in our own eye.

However, to be able to listen and not become defensive is to give the gift of understanding, or to listen before we jump to the wrong conclusion.

A parent told me that this past. summer his teenage daughter came home about a half hour late. He was angry that she had violated what he considered to be a rather liberal curfew for a girl of her age. As she started to explain her lateness, he was about to reprimand her. He decided, however, to truly listen to her explanation. When she had finished, he understood the predicament that she had found herself in when she tried to get a ride home at the right time.

He said little but listened a lot. A few days later, she spontaneously kissed him and said, “Thanks a lot for understanding what happened a couple of nights ago.”

3. Thirdly, being able to have understanding so that we can give it includes caring and compassion; knowing when help is needed and what kind of help to give. Christians above all are to be caring, compassionate and kind people.

A young woman was going home for the Christmas holidays. She was angry, very angry. Angry with her boyfriend for tempting her to stay. Angry with the crowds that jammed the airport terminal. Angry with her mother for urging her to come home, and she was angry with herself for being angry.

In the airport there was hardly room for her to stand, much less sit. She was on the verge of crying. Her plane was late, and she thought only the worst could happen.

Across from her in the airport lounge was a pretty, darkhaired mother with a baby cradled in her left-arm, a pile of parcels and a suitcase in her right hand and a two-year-old hanging on. Moving bodies pulled and pressed them from every side. The baby cried and the two-year-old sobbed. The sight was pathetic.

Suddenly he appeared. An old man. Standing beside the mother and shielding her with his body. He took the child from her arms and said, “You look after the little one. She needs your care. I’ll hold the baby. The mother let her burden go. There was the beginning of a smile on her face.

The bag the old man had been carrying now lay at his feet. With the baby in one arm and walking with a limp, he shepherded the mother to a seat occupied by a surly-looking youth with a cigarette dangling from his lips. “To my amazement,” said the young woman who had been looking on and who had been angry, “the old man asked the young man to surrender his seat.” The young man looked embarrassed, shuffled his feet, but said nothing. The old man bent over him as if to help him rise. The youth jumped, blushed, and said, “O sure, sure, she can have it.” The mother sat down, built her parcels around her like a fortress, and took the two-year old daughter on her knee. The old man recovered his bag and added it to the little wall.

The old man was fascinating. Every little thing he did made things better. The young mother relaxed. The two-year-old was laughing at something he was whispering in her ear. The baby was cooing. The crush of people eased. There was space. The old man walked up and down, crooning to the baby and patting him. His hands were large and strong, with long fingers and there was a scar at the center of one hand.

Where had those hands been and what had they done? Whatever he was, wherever he went, he made things better instead of worse. He sang to the baby and soon the eyes of the child closed. And the young woman who had been angry became happy. She was happy to be going home. The mother’s flight was called. The fortress was disbanded. The old man led the way, carrying the baby and the bags, protecting the mother and the child.

The young woman’s flight was called, but she waited to see the old man when he came back for his bag. While he was picking it up, she rushed ·over to him, tiptoed to kiss him on the cheek and thanked him. He smiled, his eyes bright and peaceful. He returned the kiss and said, “Bless you my dear, go in peace.”

The picture of the old man was still strong in the young woman's mind as she boarded her place. It made her happy, and a deep joy replaced her anger. She had seen the bluster, the noise, and the anger, conquered by human kindness and understanding. She had also seen something else. When someone gives the gift of understanding which includes caring and compassion, the gift spreads to others, it multiplies.

This Christmas, this season, consider giving the gift of understanding. Be kind, everyone you meet is carrying a burden. Amen.