Sunday December 20, 1981

"ANOTHER GIFT SUGGESTION" Luke 1:26-38
(The Gift of Acceptance)

There are so many beautiful gifts each one of us can give to others which cannot be purchased in any store, but which are invaluable--very personal gifts. Although these gifts do not cost us in dollars, they do have another kind of cost--we have to give something of ourselves, but the dividends far exceed the cost.

In previous years during this Advent and Christmas season, I have suggested and described a number of these gifts. Last Sunday I suggested giving the gift of fun. And in other years I have advised the giving of the gift of "understanding," and the gift of "time," also the gift of "a good example," and the gift of "seeing the best in other people." There are also the gifts of "listening," and the gift of "patience." Several years ago I talked about the very personal gift of "SELF-DISCLOSURE." It was the Sunday before Christmas and happened to be December 24.

In the sermon I noted that this gift of self-disclosure is one of the most precious gifts we can give to another person--particularly a person very close to us like one of our children or our parents or our spouse. A few days later I received a letter dated December 25, from one of our radio listeners. She said, "I want you to know that your sermon yesterday motivated my husband who is not well to give me the nicest Christmas gift he has given me in nearly forty-six years of marriage. He said, 'after hearing Dr. Young's sermon, and since it is Christmas and all, I want you to know it has been hard for me to say--but you know I have always loved you.'" The gift of self-disclosure.

This morning I have one more gift suggestion for you as Christmas approaches. It's a gift anyone can give and it's one of the most beautiful gifts in the world--the gift of acceptance.

Ancient Greek legend tells the story of a wicked and demanding giant. He had a bed into which he tried to fit everyone who came to visit. Individuals who were too tall would have their feet cut off so that they would fit. Those who were too short would have their limbs stretched.

This giant would not accept anyone until he made that person fit the size he thought that person should be and all people should be. He accepted very few people as they were. He knew nothing about the gift of acceptance.

On the other hand, some years ago when John McKay was the football coach at the University of Southern California, he was intereviewed on television and the subject of his son's athletic talent was raised. John Junior was a successful player on his dad's team. Coach McKay was asked to comment on the pride he must've felt over his son's accomplishments on the field. His answer was most impressive. He said, "Yes, I'm pleased that John had a good season last year. He does a fine job and I'm proud of him. But I would be just as proud if he had never played the game at all."

Coach McKay was saying in effect, that John's football talent was recognized and appreciated, but his son's human worth did not depend on his ability to play football. Thus the son would not have lost his father's acceptance if the next season brought failure and disappointment. His father loved and accepted him as a human being. He did not have to earn his father's acceptance of him, it was a gift.

There is no more precious gift than the gift of acceptance. It is a part of the overall gift of love.

Yet too often human worth or acceptance in our society is carefully reserved for those who meet certain rather rigid specifications. There was a time when left-handed people were not always accepted.

Last week, I read about a couple in their mid-thirties. He was a successful lawyer; she, manager of an exclusive boutique. They had three lovely children and a beautiful home. Since their marriage, now ten years old, the husband had derived much pleasure from the compliments his attractive and vivacious wife received when they went out together or when they entertained at home. How clever he was to have chosen such a pretty wife. How wise he was to have picked a woman whose physical appearance complimented his own.

One day he noticed she had developed some lines under her eyes, sometimes referred to as "crow's feet." As the lines deepened, his admiration began to shrink and after

a few months of unspoken concern, he decided to tell his wife about his discontent. She consulted a very fine plastic surgeon to find out what could be done. The surgeon suggested that there was no indication for surgery, and the kind of complicated and painful surgery that would be required should be reserved only for people whose appearance was markedly impaired!

Not content with this opinion, the husband urged his wife to arrange for another consultation. However, instead of seeing another surgeon, his wife arranged for a consultation with a psychologist. She wanted to know why she ever married someone like that!

The gift of acceptance is just that--a gift. It's not something that can be earned. Giving the gift of acceptance helps build self-esteem in others--something which many people desperately need, particularly children and young people.

A child's emotional development can be crippled when the child's parents try to force the child into patterns of behavior that simply are wrong for that particular child rather than simply accepting the individual for what he or she is.

Some children, for example, seem to have a high need for activity. They like to move around a lot and they need physical expression. Others seem to have less need for physical activity and appear to enjoy periods of quiet play. Trouble can begin when we can't accept the very basic personality traits of our children. And the trouble continues when we do not accept young people and older adults in the same way. The gift of acceptance.

This gift is so important because there is no one of us who is totally satisfied with ourselves as we are. And young people between the ages of 12 and 20, are often even more disappointed with who they are and what they think they look like than almost anyone. Yet too often, we as parents are constantly criticizing our children or trying to force them into a mold and we forget about the gift of acceptance.

I once knew a young man who was having a very difficult time accepting himself. He was doing poorly in college, had very low self-esteem, was too shy to make friends,

couldn't accept himself as he was. When he was a child, his father who had been a well-known football player when he was younger, tried to force the boy into athletics. Sports should be fun, particularly for a growing child. But the father started to force the issue too soon. When the boy was three years old, he couldn't catch the football his father threw to him. It bounced off his arm and gave him a bloody nose. When he was six years old, he couldn't come down the ski slope, he sprained his ankle.' When he was nine years old, he didn't want to join the little league base ball team--and his father forced him. He struck out! The father simply could not give the gift of acceptance. His son had to fit the mold he had for him. He had to attempt to earn his father's acceptance and love and never could. An ounce of acceptance is worth a pound of criticism.

Young people need also to accept their parents. There is no questions that parents make mistakes just like everyone else. No parent is adequate for the job of being a parent. It takes the gift of acceptance from children to their parents as well as the gift being given by parents to the children.

The gift of acceptance is simply the acknowledging of the worth of another human being, no matter who they are or what their skills or handicaps--no matter how they are different from us. The marriage vows put the gift of acceptance into words. We promise to accept the other for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want.

We can give the gift of acceptance more freely and easily when we accept ourselves. People who are depressed are often people who cannot accept their own accomplishments and their depression represents a heavy blanket of self-hate, of non-acceptance.

Jesus Christ, whose birth we are about to celebrate gave the beautiful and precious gift of acceptance to everyone he met--to Zaccheaus who was hated by everyone, to the woman caught in adultery, to the crippled and the outcast. To each person he came in contact with he gave the gift of acceptance. I love you, I accept you. God loves you. God accepts you as you are.

This gift of acceptance is something that applies to all of life. It's a gift you have to give to yourself as well

as to others. If for example, you can accept the fact that life is always changing, change becomes less of a threat and you can live with change more comfortably. Or if you can accept the fact of failure in your own life, then you are on the way to finding success as well. To accept failure does not mean that you stay with failure, but that once having accepting it you can go on from there. Acceptance is the opposite of denial. If I am an alcoholic but keep denying the fact, I cannot be helped, but once I accept my weakness or illness, then I can go on to be cured. At least I am able to deal with my problem more openly.

So give the gift of acceptance to yourself as well as to others this Christmas.

Remember that we can give the gift of acceptance to others and to ourselves because God accepts us. That's where the gift of acceptance comes from in the first place. God so loved the world that God gave his only Son.

God is saying through the gift of Jesus Christ, "I accept you even though you are not O.K." You do not have to earn God's acceptance in any way--it is a free gift. That's what we mean when we talk about the "grace of God." It is God's acceptance of us as a gift. To experience God's grace means most simply accepting the fact that God accepts you. Remember the gift of acceptance from God requires nothing on our part except to receive it and accept it.

We are to give the gift of acceptance in the same way that God gives it to us. There are so many people in the world who desperately need this gift--those in prison, those who are different from the majority in any society--the elderly, children, parents, the handicapped. Remember too that acceptance does not necessarily imply approval. Jesus Christ accepted many individuals whose actions he did not approve.

But the gift of acceptance does imply worth. Each individual, no matter who or what he or she is has human worth in God's eyes. If Jesus could and did accept everyone he met, we are to give the gift also. We can accept others because God loves and accepts us with all of our imperfections and mistakes and failures.

The gift of acceptance works miracles every day. I have seen many many people who lives have been changed because of the gift of acceptance.

God's aceeptance of us is the supreme gift of Christmas. This Christmas, let's spread that gift by giving it to ourselves and everyone around us--everyone we meet. Amen.