Christmas Eve 1986
THE ULTIMATE GIFT
John 1:1-14 (selected verses)

Think back for a moment through all the Christmases you've experienced. What is the most memorable, the most precious gift you've ever received? The gift that you will never forget?

Here's one answer to that question. A few years ago, I did a sermon on the Sunday before Christmas on giving the gift of "self-disclosure." In that sermon, I told the story of a man who was married to a very loving wife for 37 years. One day he 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 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 love 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."

Then in that sermon, I went on to suggest that one of the most precious gifts we can give to anyone is the gift of self-disclosure because that gift is the gift of love from one person to another. Love is most given and received through the self-disclosure of one person to another. It's a very personal gift because to disclose ourselves to another is to give a part of ourselves.

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 46 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.'"

Sometime after receiving that letter, I telephoned the woman who had written it to ask her permission to use her letter in a sermon. She readily granted me my request and went on to tell me that not too long after receiving that most precious gift from her husband, he had died. But the gift stayed with her, and she will treasure it always.

There is no greater gift than the gift of one's self, given in love.

A young woman was going home for the Christmas holidays. She was angry, very angry, angry with her boyfriend for trying to get her not to go home, 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, dark-haired mother with a baby cradled in her left arm, a pile of packages 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 young man with a cigarette dangling from his lips. "To my amazement," said the young woman 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 get up. The youth jumped, blushed, and said, "Oh sure, sure, she can have it." The mother sat down, built her packages 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.

Watching 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.

People eased. There was space. The crush of bodies seemed to lessen.

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 plane. It made her happy, and a deep joy replaced her anger. She had seen the bluster, the noise, and the anger conquered by human love, by an old man giving of himself, and she had received the most memorable Christmas gift in her life — a gift she will never forget.

She had also seen something else. When someone gives the gift of love — the gift spreads to others, it multiplies. No other gift does that.

The gift of love, the gift of self-disclosure — it's the ultimate gift, and it's what Christmas is all about.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, or it can be translated, "The love of God became a human being and lived among us." The Christmas story is about God's self-disclosure — it's about God saying to the world and to each one of us — I love you. I've always loved you since the beginning of creation. And even more than that, I will love you forever!

Tonight, there's nothing that any one of us needs to do except to receive that ultimate gift from God — the gift of the love of God in a human being — in Jesus. Receive that gift and then give the same to others and watch the miracle — watch that love multiply and spread. Amen.