Sunday, December 18, 1988
THE GIFT OF THE PRESENT - LOVE (No. 3 in a Series: Gifts We Need to Give)
Luke 2:1-8

In the first sermon in this series, I talked about receiving and giving the gift of the past, which is the gift of faith. Last Sunday, in the second sermon in the series, I spoke of giving the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope. Today, the subject is receiving and giving the gift of the present, which is the gift of love.

A man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years came home from work one day to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke. 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 about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this world, and I never told her. I always told myself that one day I would let her know how much I loved her, but I kept putting it off.”

It’s an all too familiar story. We frequently withhold one of the most precious gifts we can give — the gift of the present — which is to take time today to tell someone how much we love them, or to take time today to be with someone we love or someone who needs us. But we keep putting those things off, telling ourselves that we will do them tomorrow or the next day or whenever we have more time, and then one day it’s too late.

The gift of the present is the gift of time. Over and over again, I have heard parents lament the fact, particularly fathers, that they did not give their children the gift of the present, especially when the children were young.

One divorced man, after 20 years of marriage, described a movie scene that deeply affected him. The scene shows the end of a big Saturday outing where a father has taken his son hiking, bowling, and picnicking — everything the child had always wanted them to do together. About to be dropped off at home, the boy says, “It’s really much better having you and mom separated.” When the father asks why, the boy replies, “You’re always busy and worried about your work and making up lists of everything you have to do. Now I’ve finally made your list.”

Not long ago, a counselor was telling me about a nine-year-old boy he was working with who had a severe behavioral problem at school, in his neighborhood, and at home. In school, he was restless, fidgety, and seemed not to be much interested in learning. In the neighborhood, he was irritable and got into many fights with younger children. At home, he was negative and crabby and frequently complained about being sick. His father was a successful lawyer and had little time to spend with the boy. The mother was busy fulfilling herself and had become a full-time student at the university. The house was cared for by a series of housekeepers, none of whom stayed at the job very long.

Sometimes the parents, feeling a bit guilty about the lack of time spent with their son, would arrange a quick overnight trip to one of the several amusement parks like Worlds of Fun in Kansas City. During such a weekend, they would buy their son almost everything he wanted in a frantic attempt to atone for their lack of time during the rest of the year.

After months of counseling, the parents came to understand how badly their son wanted the gift of the present — some of their time. They came to understand that his frequent stomachaches were not stomachaches at all but were emotional pains. Intuitively, the boy

knew all along that if he were sick, his parents would show care and give him time. In a sense, he had to earn his parents' time with him through his sickness. They were not giving their presence as a gift.

After a while, when both parents started to spend more time with him, a marked change occurred. He complained less and became more pleasant to be with. As he became more agreeable, his parents began to enjoy him more and wanted to spend more time with him. His work at school improved, and he began to get along with his friends. The gift of the present, freely given, can work miracles.

We not only need to give the gift of the present to others, but we need to give it to ourselves, and that means learning to live in and enjoy the present.

We tend to forget the importance of the present because most of us spend a lot of time in our lives waiting for something. When we're very young, we can hardly wait to become a teenager. We especially wait for the time when we will be 16, so we can get our driver's license. Then we wait eagerly for the time when we are 18, 19, or 21.

No matter what our age, we do a lot of waiting. Conditions are never quite right to suit us. Some who are unmarried wait for marriage, and some who are married wait for divorce or hope to find the key that will make their marriage satisfactory. Others wait for the time when they will have children. And then they can hardly wait for the time when the children are grown.

I'm not saying that waiting is unimportant or that it is bad. Much of the waiting we do is necessary. It becomes a problem if in our waiting we do not fully appreciate and live in the present.

Some of our Christian brothers and sisters, as far as their faith is concerned, live only in the past or in the future and forget the present.

They live in the past when they emphasize only what happened in Bible times or in the early church in the first or second century A.D. Some are always looking back to a kind of golden age of Christianity. They find difficulty in relating their faith to their present circumstances.

Others look forward to the time when Jesus will return again so they can receive their reward by being taken into paradise while they watch the non-believers receive their punishment, and they forget the present time. To proclaim only an Advent future — Christ is coming — and an Advent past — Christ has come — without living in the present exposes a bankruptcy in personal faith and in the church's mission.

It's not a new kind of religious problem. The prophet Jeremiah had to deal with a similar question in the Old Testament.

Our ancestors in the faith, the Jews, had been deported from their own country to exile in Babylon. Their main hope was to someday return to their homeland, and there were some false prophets who had been fueling their hopes with the idea that they would return to their homeland soon.

Jeremiah knew this wasn't true. They would be able to return someday, of this he was sure, but it wouldn't be in the near future. They therefore faced the question of what to do in the present, the meantime. He gave them some astonishing advice: "Don't act like transients.

Don’t just camp out. Settle down. Build houses, plant gardens. Plan marriages for your children; expand your families; and above all, pray to God for the welfare of Babylon, for your welfare will depend on her welfare.”

In other words, while you are waiting, in the meantime, in the present, there are a lot of positive things you can do.

Now, it is obvious to anyone that every prisoner of war in every prisoner-of-war camp dreams of release and returning home and little else. The idea of settling down where you are a prisoner and thinking of your future there, to say nothing of praying for the welfare of your captors, is a stunning notion.

Think of it! The Jews in captivity, according to Jeremiah, are to build, to plant, and to pray. Jeremiah did not tell his people to give up all hope of ever returning to their homeland; in fact, he promised them that one day they would return — but he stressed that in the meantime they were to go about their normal business of living. And most important of all, he assured them that as they went about building, planting, and praying, God would be with them as much in Babylon as in their home, and they needed to live in the present. God is not a God of place or past or future. God’s love and care are not tied down to any one location or time in our lives or in history.

The clue to living in the present is taking hold where you are — doing the things that are necessary. If you want your life to have purpose and joy, it does not help to wallow in the thought of what might have been; rather, we are to build on what is needed and possibly where we are here and now.

In other words, living in the present as Christians means carrying on with our normal responsibilities, doing the work that needs to be done, and doing it faithfully and as best as possible.

The present is as important and God-filled as the past or the future. Therefore, live in and enjoy the present. Don’t confine yourself to the past or the future. Will Rogers used to say, “Never let yesterday use up too much of today.” We could add, “Never let tomorrow use up too much of today.” Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he said, “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for today.”

You can find meaning and purpose for your life in the present. Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever. In fact, learn to savor the present because it is only the present and will not last. Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting.

Can you stop and close your eyes and remember something beautiful that happened for only a moment or two many years ago? It may have been a view of a spectacular landscape, or a conversation that made you feel loved and appreciated, or being with a close friend that you had not seen for a long time. In a sense, it did not last very long, but in another sense, it has lasted all those years and is still going on. But it only has lasted if at the time it happened you also savored it.

The gift of the present is about loving and being loved; enjoying your food and sitting in the sun rather than rushing through lunch and hurrying back to the office. It is about savoring the beauty of moments that don’t last. It is about truly being totally present with people and listening to them rather than always thinking ahead about what you are going to be doing next.

Corita Kent, the former nun turned graphic artist, says in one of her posters, “Life is a series of moments — to live each one is to succeed.”

We never solve the problem of living once and for all. We can only deal with it day by day, a constant struggle to fill each day with one day’s worth of meaning.

The gift of the present is one of the most precious gifts we can give to others and to ourselves.

I like the card that says, “I shall pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

What’s all this got to do with Advent and Christmas? This season, especially Christmas, is about God being with us in the present — about God’s continued presence among us. The whole Christmas story is contained in this one verse from Luke’s gospel: “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.”

God is present in the everyday events of life. Receive the gift of God being present among us, and then give that gift of love to others. Amen.