Christmas Eve 1988
THE ULTIMATE GIFT
John 1:14

"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Arnold was going to die soon, and he knew it. He had chosen not to live. The worst part about his decision was that he had no one he could talk to about it, no one who especially cared about him, no one who made him feel that his life was worthwhile.

Arnold had been on dialysis for two years because of kidney failure. Now he wanted the whole business to end. Three times a week, he had driven an hour to a dialysis center to be hooked up to a dialysis machine, and he would sit, reading or watching TV, until the cleansing process finished six hours later. Then he'd drive home to have supper. Physically, he felt listless, lacking the energy a person his age should have. Because of the dialysis schedule, he was not able to hold down a regular job. Dependent on a machine, he was angry and tired of doing everything alone. He felt powerless over his life.

So Arnold told the medical staff he was finished with the machine. His life did not seem worth living. The doctors tried to dissuade him, but he wouldn't listen. He had decided to stop dialysis.

When his brother Albert called, he was a little surprised. He had never leveled with his brother about his discomfort and problems. As children, they had been close. They had always laughed and played together and worked together on the farm where they grew up. But in later years, they had grown apart.

Albert had joined the army, but for medical reasons, Arnold had been left home. Since that time, he had always been left behind. Albert's life seemed full and rich with possibilities. Arnold's seemed restricted and enclosed. Albert came back from Vietnam a decorated hero. Arnold had worked at the feed mill. Albert got a job in the city as an accountant. Arnold's job came to an end because of dialysis.

Albert fell in love and got married. Arnold learned that dialysis meant he could not have children, and that stopped his hopes for marriage and a family.

When Arnold had written to Albert the week before, he had finally admitted the severity of the emptiness in his life. But the sound of Albert's voice on the phone made him tense, ready to defend himself. He was waiting for any sign of rejection.

Albert said to his brother, "I can't begin to comprehend the aloneness of your decision. I want to come see you and hear how you truly feel about this. I don't want you making up your mind to quit dialysis all by yourself. Can we meet and talk?"

Arnold gave permission, although he wasn't sure that he wanted to see his brother. They agreed to meet at a restaurant. As the day of the meeting came near, Arnold became agitated. And his nervousness increased when he saw Albert seated with a friend. "Probably a war buddy," he thought, or one of his friends from work. "I'll cut this short."

Albert introduced the person with him as Jake Bingham. He explained that Jake had a kidney transplant a year ago and that he had asked him along to talk about his experience.

Arnold sat down and listened to Jake tell his story. He explained that he had been on dialysis for eight years and that he had felt powerless, as if his life was passing him by. He'd been on the waiting list for a kidney transplant for the whole eight years. He also knew a woman whose body had rejected two kidneys, so they told her she couldn't have another one. But his doctor had kept her eyes open for a donated kidney that suitably matched his. From the time she called him to tell him about a donor kidney till the time it was transplanted, nine hours passed. It had been successful. And he went on to say that it had given him a chance for the life he could imagine but had never experienced before. You might say he'd been given the gift of life itself.

He went on to explain that not all kidney donors are accident victims. Some of them, usually the best matches, are voluntarily given by one of the recipient's living family members. And then he said, "I understand that you have never thought of a sibling donation, but your brother wanted me to tell you that he'd done some checking and would like to go through tests to see whether your body would accept one of his kidneys. Have you ever thought of that possibility?"

Albert then asked to be excused for a few minutes so that Jake could continue the conversation and say what Albert was unable to express himself.

Jake then said to Arnold, "Your brother wants to give you one of his kidneys. He feels that he's never been able to show you he really loves you. He's never had that chance before. I know that you and your brother have had differences these past years, but by doing this, he feels that he'd be giving you a part of himself, something he never could give anyone else, something you need. He may be the only one who can give you this gift. And he's willing to face the pain and risk of surgery. To give a gift is easy; having the strength and courage to receive one is difficult."

"To accept your brother's kidney is to admit physical weakness. You will have to decide how much you need your brother's love and help. When a gift is precious, it's unreturnable, unexchangeable. It's given once and for all. Accept it, Arnold. Not because you're under obligation or indebtedness, but because you recognize how precious it is. You know this gift is undeserved and unearned. Some people say 'No' to a kidney transplant because they don't have the courage to accept someone's gift."

During the next few weeks, Arnold thought about Jake's advice. He and his brother talked about the risks involved and the chances for success. Then appointments were made, and the tests appeared to show a good match.

Still, Arnold had his doubts. He'd be putting his brother through pain. It haunted him that he would never be able to repay his brother's gift of life. Yet the hope of a fresh start at life convinced him to accept the gift.

In the moments before the surgery, Albert, the donor, said, "Honest to God, Arnold, I don't know what I would have done if you had not said yes. I wanted to do this for you so much, not to look strong, but to let you know I love you. Thanks for accepting my Christmas gift."

Love in this story became flesh. The ultimate gift offers a part of the giver. The most precious gifts are given once in a lifetime out of love. They are undeserved, unearned, unreturnable, priceless.

“The love of God became flesh and dwelt among us.” The gift of God’s love in Jesus is unearned, unreturnable, priceless. Tonight and always, all you need to do is accept this gift. God wants you to have it. Amen.