Sunday, December 2, 1990
GIFTS THAT JESUS GIVES US (No. 1 in a Series: The Gift of a Good Example)
John 13:3-5,12-17

We have entered the season of giving. That's what the advertisements tell us. What the ads really want us to enter is the season of spending, of buying. For many of us, buying and the giving of gifts go together. In our "thing-oriented culture," we all too often equate giving with buying. The question most frequently heard at this time of year is, "Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?" Others ask, "I wonder what he or she bought me for my Christmas present?"

I have to confess that I'm not a very creative Christmas shopper. I usually have trouble deciding what gifts to buy for my wife and other members of the family.

Yet, like most people, I deeply enjoy giving and receiving gifts. I look forward to the Christmas neckties and the other surprising gifts that come at Christmas. But I also wonder if we have too narrowly limited our definition of gifts and giving by thinking primarily of objects or things that can be bought.

This past week, I kept thinking back to my childhood and all those growing-up years in a large family where there was lots of love, fun, and acceptance, and I tried to determine what the most precious gifts were that I received from my parents, brothers, sisters, and others at Christmas time. As I looked back, the most wonderful gifts were not objects or things at all. Oh sure, I remember the Gilbert Erector Set that my older brother and I wanted so much and which we got one Christmas many, many years ago. It lasted for a long time.

But most of all, I remember the gifts of fun and laughter that came from being together, and which had their origin in a deeper joy as we consciously or unconsciously were celebrating God's many gifts to us, especially through the person of Jesus.

So in this sermon series beginning today, you will be getting some different kinds of gift ideas that you might want to use — suggestions for the giving of priceless gifts that cannot be purchased anywhere. These are gifts that Jesus originally gave us and still gives us, and which we can, in turn, also give to others.

The first gift that Jesus gives to us, and which you can give to others, is the gift of a good example. What the disciples remembered most about Jesus, and what affected them the most, was the example he set for them. Today, we would call it a "role model."

According to the Gospel of John, during the evening of the last supper with his disciples, before his trial and crucifixion, Jesus got up from the table and prepared to wash the feet of the disciples. And when he had finished washing their feet, he said to them, "If I, then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." And then he went on to say, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." It was an example, of course, of much more than washing one another's feet; it was an example of being a loving servant to one another, an example of deeply caring for one another.

This was not the only instance of the gift of a good example that Jesus gave to his disciples. They remembered how he treated the outcasts of his time with dignity and respect. They

remembered how forgiving he was of others. He was their role model as they carried on their own ministry after his death and resurrection.

Each one of us has the ability to give the gift of a good example. It's a gift that will continue on and on because it will live on in the people to whom we have given it. In fact, we give the gift of an example all the time, but it's not always the gift of a good example.

Some years ago, I was trying to help a young woman who was anxious and afraid of almost everything. She worried about doing a good job where she worked. She worried all the time about whether or not people liked her. She worried about getting sick. She even worried about being worried all the time. During one of our conversations, she said, "I think I'm just like my mother. She worries the same way I do. Do you think I learned it from her?"

"Probably so," I replied. Many of our emotional attitudes are learned, not so much by what others tell us, but by a process of imitating someone we respect or love.

This young woman had learned from her mother to see the scary possibilities in every new situation. When she was young and would go to a birthday party, she remembered her mother anxiously asking whether or not there were any children there who had colds. When she was a bit older and took swimming lessons, she recalled her mother being more interested in whether the pool was properly supervised than in finding out how much the girl had learned.

As a teenager, she was scared by her mother's stories of girls who were raped because they stayed out too late or went to parties not properly supervised. The daughter naturally imitated her mother from an observed and modeled example. The problem was that, in many ways, the mother in this case was not a very good example to follow.

On the other hand, the mother could've given the daughter a most valuable gift — the gift of a good example. Think about your own behavior for a minute. How do you treat people? How do you talk about others at home? The way we treat people is most often learned from having imitated or followed the example of someone we respect or love. Also, think for a moment, who do you remember most fondly from the past? For most of us, it will be a person who set a good example for us, a person who gave us that very precious gift.

"I have given you an example," said Jesus. How often the disciples must've recalled not only those words but the living example of Jesus in their lives. There are so many gifts of good examples one can give. Parents can give their children the gift of a good example in their religious life. How we prepare for and celebrate Advent and Christmas can be the gift of a good example. You can give the gift of a good example in how you deal with disappointment and failure. Children especially will learn more about the love of God from us as parents than from anyone.

And what a wonderful gift it is in return when someone to whom we have been a good example tells us what it has meant to them. This past week, when I was discussing this sermon idea with the rest of the church staff, one staff member said, "I know exactly what you are talking about. I wrote my dad a letter earlier this year to tell him what a good example he had been for me in my life. This letter was his birthday present. Now I'm especially glad that I wrote it because he died several months later, and parts of the letter were able to be used at his funeral. If I hadn't written the letter, he would've never known what a good example he was to me and that it is the most precious gift I received from him."

Here’s part of what she said in her letter to her dad:

Dear Dad: I want to thank you for all the things you have given me over the years. They are things I will cherish forever. I want to thank you for the gift of laughter. Thanks to you, I love to laugh. Thanks to you, I have the gift of a sense of humor. I want to thank you for the gift of being a caring, compassionate, and giving person. I want to thank you for giving me the gift of good work ethics. You also taught me to appreciate the little things in life — sunsets, a good book, a walk in the park, a good meal, and even squeezing your hand when you lie in bed. Most of all, I want to thank you for being my father. Over the years, you’ve given me good standards to live by. You taught me to be honest, friendly, happy, secure, and loving. These are treasures that cannot be measured in pounds or by size... but they’ll always be with me. You will always be with me.

What a gift for this dad to receive from his daughter. And what a gift she received from him. This Advent and Christmas season, receive the gift from Jesus of his example, then be like Jesus — give the gift of a good example. It can be the best and most priceless gift you have ever given anyone. Amen.