Sunday, December 16, 1990
GIFTS THAT JESUS GIVES US (No. 3 in a Series: The Gift of Faith)
Deuteronomy 6:4-9; I John 4:7-12

There was a man who received a telegram informing him that a relative had died and left him some valuable property. Excited, he went to the Rabbi for details, only to be told that the relative was Moses and the valuable property was the Jewish religious tradition. The man went away disappointed that the gift was religious wisdom and not downtown real estate.

Religious wisdom from the past and one's personal faith, which is built upon that inherited wisdom, can be an important gift and legacy. Someone recently told me a story about his great-great-grandfather. While researching his family history, he came across the will of that great-great-grandfather, whom he had of course never met. He found the will in a family album, on lined pages in a careful, cursive hand. The first thing he noticed was that this will had nothing to do with the distribution of funds or property. It was wholly devoted to matters of moral, civic, and religious concerns. It was a statement of his most basic beliefs, which he left as a gift to his children and those following. What a gift to receive!

Can you think of any more challenging exercise than setting down on paper those things you most deeply believe, things you would wish your own children and other loved ones to consider as guides for their own lives?

Ideally, of course, we shouldn't have to write such things down. Thomas Jefferson said, "It is in our lives, and not our words, that our religion must be read."

Yet putting our basic beliefs into a written form, our statement of faith, can be a help not only to those who follow but also to us. It's also risky because then we can see if what we say we believe is being lived out in our day-to-day activities. And those who read what we have written will also know if we are living out what we say we believe.

That's what the 66 books in the Bible are — a written record of the faith and actions of our religious ancestors. The 66 books are the gift of faith to us from our Jewish ancestors and from Jesus and the early church.

In one of the earliest books of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, we are reminded what our basic faith is and that we are to give this gift of faith to those who follow us: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home."

Jesus received this gift of faith from the Old Testament, from his parents, and from the religious community of his time, and then he gave it to us. Now it is our gift to continue to give.

To be sure, whether or not we write down our values and beliefs, we cannot help but pass them on to our children and others who love us and know us. As I said in the first sermon in this series, we are all the time giving the gift of an example, and hopefully, it is the gift of a good example rather than the curse of a bad example.

So this Christmas, I want to suggest that you consider giving the gift of your faith in the form of a written legacy to those whom you love. That's what I'm going to do. By drawing up your

“faith/ethical” will, you will be challenged to weigh and measure your most precious legacy, the truth by which you live. It will help you ask and answer such questions as: What am I living for? What would I die for? How do I rank faith, love, friendship, knowledge, duty, money, success, and kindness, knowing that often they conflict with one another? What is the purpose of life? And of death?

Here then is my personal statement of faith as it exists in December 1990. It is my gift to you, dear members and friends of this congregation, and also my gift to my children and their spouses, my grandchildren, and any others who are interested. Believing that we continue to grow in faith and knowledge and in our experience of the presence of God, I reserve the right to alter and add to this will and testament as the years pass.

To begin, I believe that there is one God who created all that is and that God continues to create. It is an ongoing process. The best way I can describe God using words is that God is a loving, forgiving presence. God is the power of love at work in all of creation. I believe, therefore, that love is the most powerful force in the universe. When we love, God’s power, God’s love flows through us. When we forgive, then again God’s power flows through us. When we hate or when we are unforgiving, God’s love and power do not flow through us. We become, in electrical terms, an insulator rather than a conductor.

I believe that whatever God creates is good. God does not make junk. Therefore, we human beings are created good. Life is meant to be a blessing. It is God who gives life. There is no place in all of creation where God is not. God loves you whether you believe it or not. God’s grace is there for all people. There is nothing we can do or need to do to earn God’s love. It is freely given to all. It is there for us to accept or not accept.

Being created as free people with the power of choice, we can foul things up, and we do. The religious word for it is “sin.” We sometimes worship false gods. We can and do become greedy, hateful, jealous, envious, and more. In fact, I believe that today greed is one of the most destructive forces in the world. To put it into Biblical words, “we all sin and fall short of the glory of God.”

I believe that I can know and experience more about God through the person of Jesus than in any other way. I see in Jesus the incarnation of God’s gracious presence in a human being. I believe that Jesus lived the ideal human life. It was a life for others. He embraced the world as God created it. He saw life as a blessing, and he lived life as a blessing. He had a unique relationship with God and became the channel for the expression of spiritual powers no one had ever before dreamed of. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can now all experience the spirit and power of God in a new way.

I believe that God has so made creation that we are all connected and related to each other and to other parts of creation in ways that we are now only beginning to understand. There is a wholeness, a unity in creation that we do not always perceive. We are interdependent. We need each other, and we are meant to live in community, to live in harmony with one another and with creation itself.

One of the most helpful ways to define sin from a Christian point of view, in addition to what I said earlier, is that sin is the refusal to acknowledge relatedness and connectedness. Sin means to live as if we are separated from others and therefore from God. The letter of 1 John in the New Testament reminds us that “If we say we love God and hate another human being, we are liars.” Sin is when we elevate our independence and come to think that we are the only

ones who are important or when we believe that we are better than others or that God loves us more than someone else.

I believe, therefore, that one of the greatest single threats to our society today is what I choose to call secular relativism. It's difficult for many human beings to be passionate about life or to have a commitment to anything other than their individual agendas.

The fruits of this kind of secular relativism are rootlessness, greed, and a lack of a sense of the sacred. By rootlessness, I mean that too many people have no sense of their heritage, no sense of being connected to anything or anyone. They are loners. I have already mentioned greed as one of the most destructive forces in our culture. It means wanting to get all I can for myself in any way I can. People can no longer say "no" to themselves. By a lack of the sense of the sacred, I mean that for many there is no sense of the holy. All you need to do is look at MTV. Everything is inverted. That which is holy is profaned, and that which is profane is made holy.

Here are some day-to-day applications of what I believe.

I believe that the way we treat people is the way we treat God. Being kind and compassionate toward others is the most important of all. The Bible says this in many different ways. The prophet Micah in the Old Testament puts it very succinctly: "What does God require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." I also believe that God judges us accordingly. Remember the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which Jesus told as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-45, where the parable ends with Jesus saying, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I also believe that God expects us to be individuals who use the reasoning powers God has given us. Therefore, my motto has been that of Tom Dooley, who said, "Trust everyone, but cut the cards." Jesus said it in another way: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

I believe that people who live morally and ethically good lives are happier than those who don't. It's a natural by-product. Unfortunately, in our time, the message of our culture seems to be that goodness is boring; glitz makes you known. People like Donald Trump make the cover of magazines, but the family men or women who live lives of monogamy and raise decent children are rarely known and celebrated. Yet deep down, I believe such good, decent people are the truly happy ones.

I believe that being a religious person forces you to ask the big questions daily. Secular life doesn't. Religious people are used to asking, "What is the purpose of life? Why am I here? Why is there suffering? What is the meaning of salvation?" Religious people ask such questions, and they are large questions that help put one's life in perspective. What forces the secular person to ask the big questions? Nothing. Their questions are: "Where will we dine tonight? Will it be Italian or Chinese?"

That's why I believe belonging to a church and participating regularly in worship are so important. These activities can help one see life in its larger perspectives. They remind us regularly that there is more to life than paying the monthly bills, or making more money, or living in a larger house, or wearing designer clothes. Being regular in worship can help keep alive a sense of the sacred and what is holy.

I believe that life is a process of continued learning and that no matter how religious we are or how many undergraduate or graduate degrees we have, we never arrive at the point where we have all the truth. In that regard, here are two quotations I hope you will commit to memory. G.K. Chesterton said, “A heretic is not a person who denies the truth, but a person who knows part of the truth and thinks it is the whole truth.” And Dr. Lewis Thomas wrote, “The greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance.”

I believe life can best be described metaphorically as a journey, a pilgrimage. We never completely arrive in this life. There is always more to learn, more to do, more to experience. It also means that to live boldly is to suffer. If you want to live a pain-free life, if you devote your life to avoiding pain and suffering, you will avoid growing. Growth and pain are two sides of the same coin. This does not mean that one is to consciously seek out suffering, but you have to stop trying simply to avoid it. As the Bible says, “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

I believe that no one can live without hope. I further believe that there are many things and events in which we can see a reason for hope. God has given us a seed-like presence of that which is hoped for. For example, in the seed of a tree, the stem and leaves are already present, and this gives us the right to sow the seed in hope for the fruit. We have no absolute assurance that it will develop. But our hope is genuine. There is a presence, a beginning of what is hoped for.

In the same way, we can have hope for a lasting love because we feel the power of this love present. But it is hope, not certainty. I have hope that God’s love will prevail over all other forces because I continually see the seeds of God’s love at work in the world. I believe, therefore, that the reign of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy.

I also believe each one of us has the right to hope for our personal participation in eternal life. We begin to experience the presence of the eternal in us and in our world here and now. We experience it in moments of silence and in hours of creativity. We experience it in the ecstasy of love. We experience it when we discover a lasting truth and feel the need for a great sacrifice.

We experience a taste of the eternal in the moments in which we feel: this is a holy place, a holy thing, a holy person, a holy time; it transcends the ordinary experience. This is the basis for my hope for eternal life. And when I remember the birth of Jesus at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, and resurrection on Easter, I point to the most powerful examples of the same experience. May this be your hope too. Amen.