Sunday, November 29, 1992
DON'T QUENCH THE SPIRIT
Matthew 26:6-13

Whenever I use the word "spirit" or "spirits," I've found it helpful to define what I mean. In the first church I served thirty-five years ago, most of the congregation members had little background in the Christian faith.

One day, I was having a conversation with one of the men in the church, a new father, whose baby daughter was to be baptized the coming Sunday. I asked him if he was adequately prepared for this sacred event. He told me that he and his wife were going to have a big party for all their friends and relatives following the baptism and that they were certainly prepared. To prove it, he gave me a list of the food they were going to serve.

"No, no," I said, "I mean, are you spiritually prepared?"

"Well, I don't know," replied the new father thoughtfully. "Do you think a half dozen bottles of wine and two quarts of bourbon are enough?"

Or I think about the church member who told his minister that he would give him a bottle of expensive cherry brandy on the condition that the gift would be acknowledged in the parish newsletter. The next issue of the newsletter said, "The minister wishes to thank Mr. Black for his gift of fruit and the spirit in which it was given."

"Do not quench the Spirit" here means the Holy Spirit and the spirit that is a part of each one of us. We often talk about the "spirit" of a person. We are spiritual beings having a human existence. As spiritual beings, we have an enormous effect on one another. We can be uplifting to another person's spirit, or we can be a spirit quencher.

The phrase "Do not quench the Spirit" comes from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians. He wrote: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances… Do not quench the Spirit." When we are not thankful and therefore are unhappy people, we quench the Spirit — that is, we block God's Spirit from working in us, and we also become spirit quenchers for others.

As we approach the holy season of Christmas, it's an appropriate time to think and talk about "spirit quenchers." Scrooge, in Charles Dickens' story A Christmas Carol, was a premier spirit quencher. Spirit quenchers come in several categories.

Consider fault-finding as a spirit quencher. It is the easiest of all pastimes and perhaps the most deadly. I recall the story of a gifted young soprano who inspired everyone in the choir with her pure voice. She was so good that the choir director took her under his wing and virtually coached her into a New York career. Once in New York City, she started taking voice lessons from a well-known teacher. Though he was many years her senior, they fell in love and were married. Suddenly, her voice began to fade. It didn't matter that he went everywhere with her. She kept slipping. After every performance, her husband would greet her with a list of mistakes — all lovingly presented but still generating an overload of criticism. She quit.

After seventeen years, her husband died. It was then that she met a car salesman who didn't know anything about singing. All he knew was that he loved to hear her sing the hymns when

they went to church. And he told her. Gradually, she developed the courage to return to the choir. The strident quality that had ended her singing career suddenly began to fade. Within a year, her pure, captivating voice returned. Musical directors eagerly sought her out, and she ended up singing in several Broadway productions. Why? Because the fertile soil of affirmation instead of spirit quenching allowed her to reclaim her God-given talent.

Jesus was above all a spirit uplifter, not a spirit quencher, but he was constantly having to deal with spirit quenchers.

Here's one example: Jesus had come to the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany. While he was there, a woman — perhaps someone who had followed him at a distance up to this point — came to him and, in a gesture of worship and adoration, anointed him with a jar of very expensive ointment.

It was a beautiful thing to do. Her unblocked impulse deeply moved Jesus. He liked the spontaneity of the act. It was not smothered by caution and prudence. She did not pour out a few drops and say, "Well, I guess that's enough for this occasion." She was completely lifted out of herself in an act of great devotion and love.

But there were spirit quenchers present, and surprisingly, they were the disciples. They criticized her gift. They were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor."

Jesus, however, accepted her gift and her devotion in a gracious manner. He did not in any way quench her spirit but affirmed it. The disciples, in their fault-finding mode, were spirit quenchers.

Another kind of spirit quencher is the "yes, but" person. A yes-butter doesn't tell his wife, "I noticed you got the gas tank filled, that's wonderful, thanks." Rather, he says, "Yes, you got the gas tank filled. But did you ask them to fix the turn signals?" She didn't, and her warm glow has been doused, her spirit quenched.

A yes-butter doesn't tell her married daughter, "This has been such a nice day, I'm glad you could come, I always enjoy your visits so much." She says instead, "This has been such a nice day, but you really should come to see me more frequently." The daughter's spirit has been quenched.

A yes-butter says to his child upon seeing the report card, "Yes, those are very good grades, but I hope you will do as well or even better next semester." Or the student shows the report card to another person and the response is, "Yes, those are good grades, but wait until you get into high school or college; then it's much more difficult to get good grades."

The student wonders, "What's next semester got to do with this grade card, or what's high school or college got to do with it? Why can't I be recognized for the good job I've done without someone always mentioning the good job I've got to do in the future?"

Yes-butters give a gift and then take it away again. What we're talking about here is being able to accept another person's accomplishments and rejoicing with them. Then we uplift the spirit instead of quenching it.

When the woman gave the beautiful gift to Jesus, he accepted it with joy. However, the disciples were both fault-finders and yes-butters. “Yes, it was a beautiful gift, but she shouldn’t have wasted it. It should have been sold, and the money given to the poor.”

Here’s another way of looking at it: In addition to receiving a gift, Jesus also gave the unnamed woman a most precious and unusual gift that day. It was the gift of letting her give to him. He gave her a gift and uplifted her spirit by the way in which he received her gift.

This is a gift we usually don’t think much about — the gift of letting others give to us. It can be one of the most important gifts we ever give and be spiritually uplifting.

The disciples who were with Jesus in the home of Simon the Leper at Bethany that day were not able to give that gift to the woman who poured the expensive ointment on the head of Jesus. They were critical of her act of impulsive devotion. “She shouldn’t have done it,” they said. Haven’t we done the same thing at times? Someone gives us a precious gift, and our immediate response is, “You shouldn’t have done it. It’s much too expensive.” Whenever we find it difficult to give the gift of letting others give to us, we quench the spirit of the person giving us the gift.

Children are often the best at giving unusual, impulsive, unexpected gifts, and they work so hard at trying to do their best in giving us those gifts. We need to give them the gift of letting them give to us. Sometimes it’s better not to ask any questions and simply graciously receive the gift.

One mother had been sick in bed for several days, and her daughter decided to make her some hot tea to help her feel better. It was to be a surprise. The six-year-old brought the tea into the bedroom and then waited as her mother drank it so that she could be properly congratulated for her good deed. Her mother drank the tea and then asked the little girl how she went about making the tea. “Just like you do, Mommy,” she said. “First I take the tea leaves and boil them, and then I strain them.” “What did you strain them with?” asked the mother. “Oh,” replied the little girl, “I couldn’t find the strainer, so I used the fly swatter.” Sensing that she had done something wrong by the look on her mother’s face, she tried to put her mother’s mind at ease. “Oh, I didn’t use the new fly swatter,” she reassured her mother. “I used the old one.”

During this holy season of Advent and Christmas, a season of giving and receiving, “don’t quench the Spirit.” Amen.