Sunday, November 28, 1993
A GIFT WE ALL NEED (No. 1 in a Series: Priceless Gifts)
John 13:3-5,12-17

We are entering the season of giving and receiving gifts, which in our culture means it's also a time of spending and buying. Because we live in a "thing"-oriented culture, the gifts we give to others are usually gifts that have been bought. A question often heard at this time of year is, "Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?" Other questions heard are: "What's on your Christmas list?" "What are some of the things you want for Christmas?"

When it comes to purchasing gifts, I'm not a very creative Christmas shopper. Yet like most people, I deeply enjoy giving and receiving gifts. But I also wonder if we too narrowly limit our definition of gifts and giving by thinking primarily of objects that can be bought and given.

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 remember 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 received one Christmas many years ago. It lasted for a long time. But I can't remember much else in terms of material things.

Most of all, I remember the gifts of fun, love, and laughter that came from being together and which had their origin in a deeper joy as we consciously or unconsciously were celebrating at Christmas time God's many gifts to us.

So in this sermon series beginning today, I want to suggest some different kinds of gifts that you might want to consider giving and receiving. These are priceless gifts that cannot be purchased anywhere. They are gifts that Jesus originally gave to us and still gives, and which we, in turn, can give to others.

One of these gifts that Jesus gives to us and that 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."

Many years ago in another congregation, I was trying to help a young woman who was anxious and afraid of almost everything. She worried about doing a good job at work. She worried if people liked her or not. 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 way I do. Do you think I learned it from her?"

"Yes," I replied, "Perhaps you did." 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.

The more we talked, the more it became obvious that 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 there were any children there who had colds. When she was a bit older and took swimming lessons, she recalled her mother would usually be more interested in whether the pool was properly supervised than in rejoicing in what her daughter had learned.

As a teenager, she was scared by her mother's stories of young women who were raped because they stayed out too late or went to parties where the parents weren't home. The daughter naturally imitated her mother from little on up; she observed and unconsciously modeled herself after her mother. 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 have given the daughter a most valuable gift — the gift of a good example. It's a gift we all need and that each one of us can give to someone else. It's a gift that will be longer lasting than almost any other gift that can be given to those we love.

Being a model for other people's behavior is a big responsibility, and it's a responsibility that none of us can escape. Like it or not, good example or bad, other people are influenced by our example, and this is especially true of those closest to us and most true of our children when they are young and impressionable.

Think about your own behavior for a minute. How do you treat people? How do you talk to others at home? The way we treat people is most often learned by having imitated or followed the example of someone we love or respect. How do you view life? Are you mostly optimistic or pessimistic? The chances are that you are following an example that you picked up at an early age. 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.

Some years ago, a noted psychologist conducted an experiment that has since become a classic. Dr. Solomon Asch, at Princeton University, would ask a student to judge the length of a line. When the student was surrounded by others who expressed the judgment that the line was longer than it actually was, the student tended to see the line as being longer. When the student was exposed to opinions that the line was shorter, he or she tended to judge the line as being shorter. The students in the experiment did not consciously realize that their own judgment of the line's length was being affected by the opinions of others. But it was.

What the disciples remembered most about Jesus and what affected them the most for the rest of their lives was the example he set for them. 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 his 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."

Of course, it was an example of much more than washing one another's feet. It was an example of being a loving servant to one another, of deeply caring for each other.

This was not the only instance of the gift of a good example that Jesus gave to his followers. 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 his ministry after his death and resurrection.

"I have given you an example," said Jesus. How frequently the disciples must have recalled those words and the actions that went with them.

There are so many gifts of good examples that each one of us 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 handle disappointment and failure.

Children especially will learn more about the love of God from us as parents than from anyone else.

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.

A few days ago, I was talking with a friend of mine about this sermon subject, and she said to me, “I know exactly what you mean. 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 used at his funeral. If I hadn’t written the letter, he would have never known what a good example he was to me and that it is the most precious gift I received from him.”

This Advent and Christmas season, choose something in your life wherein you want to be a better example to those around you. You can give that gift not only during this season but all through the coming year. It can be the most precious and everlasting gift you have ever given anyone. Amen.