Sunday, December 5, 1993
A TIMELY GIFT (No. 2 in a Series: Priceless Gifts)
Luke 10:38-42

What gifts are you going to give to those you love this Advent and Christmas season? That's a question that is on many people's minds. As I said last week in the first sermon in this series, we live in a "thing"-oriented culture, so for many of us, the giving of gifts means buying gifts to give. We describe it as "Christmas shopping," which normally precedes Christmas giving.

In spite of the fact that Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," we all enjoy receiving gifts as well as giving them, and that's okay. In fact, the spirit in which we give or receive a gift can enhance the gift. We've all heard it said — and have stated it ourselves—"It isn't so much the gift that counts, but it's the thought behind the gift or the spirit in which it is given."

Some gifts are given because the giver feels obligated to give. It's the custom. Other gifts are given to relieve our own guilt. Some gifts are bribes. And there are gifts that are given to show our power and to impress others. One father, when his son turned sixteen and got his driver's license, gave his son a new Mercedes. Because of a feeling of inadequacy in his own childhood and because he wanted to impress others, the father felt impelled to give his son not transportation but a status symbol. In this case, the young man would have preferred a car that didn't draw so much attention to itself.

Some gifts are given because of the newest fad. On their 15th wedding anniversary, a husband gave his wife an expensive imported food processor. The machine was used twice, and now it stands neatly covered with plastic in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. Our homes are filled with gadgets and small appliances that we seldom use but love to possess.

To help us all in our Christmas giving and receiving, in this sermon series, I'm suggesting there are some priceless gifts we can give and receive which cannot be purchased anywhere.

Last week in the first sermon in this series, I suggested we give to those we love what Jesus gave to his followers — the gift of a good example.

Today, in the second sermon in this series, I want to suggest another priceless gift for those you love — a gift that will be especially appreciated during this season leading up to Christmas. This priceless gift is the gift of "time." To give time to those you love can be the most beautiful and most remembered gift of all. Time, for most of us, especially in today's world, is a precious commodity. It is a non-renewable resource; once a moment is spent, it is gone forever.

The concept of time is, in itself, mysterious. Einstein theorized that like everything else in creation, time is relative. When asked to explain, he is reported to have said, "When you are with the person you love, time passes quickly, but when you are with someone you dislike, time moves slowly."

Today we measure time with two different kinds of clocks or watches — digital and those with sweep hands that move around the face of a clock in a circle or "clockwise," from left to right, with the hands pointing to numbers. I still prefer watches or clocks with hands that move in a circle and point to numbers. Here we have a picture of time related to space. Furthermore, the

circle in which the hands move reminds us of the earth's rotation and its movement around the sun. The clock with hands is a mechanical version of the ancient sundial.

The digital watch, on the other hand, divides up time into bits, bytes, or segments, and when we look at a digital watch, we do not see the movement of time in the same way. We do not see time as related to space, but are only able to see what hour or minute of the day it is. It's like looking at only one day of a calendar at a time and not seeing the whole month or year.

Some observers of the human scene have used these two kinds of clocks as metaphors for two different types of personalities. They say, for example, that a digital person is one who is very much concerned with accuracy. "What time is it?" The digital watch will tell you exactly. Sweeper people, on the other hand, tend to consider things in a broader context and are more interested in the overall picture rather than the small details. There's certainly a need for both kinds of people and both types of watches.

The point is that in our culture, we are more and more "time"-oriented people. We tend to live our lives by the clock. A sermon could be given on the "tyranny of time." Our language reveals how important "time" is to us.

We "make time, save time, spend time, waste time, cut time, tell time, borrow time, budget time, invest time, find time, lose time, manage time, have time, squander time, squeeze time, push time, bend time, beg time, limit time, spare time, hurry time, slow time, give time, keep time, watch time, free time, stop time, kill time, and even call time out."

We live in a world that worships speed. We talk about living life in the fast lane. There is instant coffee, instant tea, quick-cooking oatmeal, fast food, and more. The problem is we also want instant friendship, instant love, instant wealth, instant wisdom, and instant faith in God.

As I said in a sermon several years ago, the microwave is an apt symbol for much that goes on in the world where we worship speed and expect instant gratification. People no longer want to save money to buy something. We can purchase almost anything with instant credit and time payments. We even believe we can solve complex social problems instantly with a microwave approach. We've declared war on poverty and on drugs, implying that these problems can be solved quickly.

Lest you misunderstand, there is a place in our world for quickness, speed, and urgency. If I'm severely injured, then I want to get medical help as soon as possible.

But there are things that take time. It takes time and patience to build lasting, loving human relationships. There are some things that cannot be microwaved. It takes time and lots of time for a deep Christian faith to develop, grow, and mature.

Thus, one of the most priceless gifts you can give to another human being is the gift of time. Over and over again, I have heard parents lament the fact — and particularly fathers — that they did not give their family and especially their children the gift of their time. On the other hand, as I have said in previous sermons, I have never heard a father or mother or husband or wife or single person say, "I wish that I had spent more time at the office."

One divorced man, after 20 years of marriage, described a movie scene that deeply affected him. The scene shows the end of a big Saturday outing where a father has taken his son hiking, bowling, and picnicking — everything the child had always wanted them to do together.

About to be dropped off at his mother's home, the boy says, "It's really much better having you and mom separated." When the dad asks why, the son replies, "You're always so busy and worried about your work and making up lists of everything you have to do. Now I've finally made your list."

Not long ago, a professional counselor was telling me about a nine-year-old girl she was working with who had a severe behavior problem at school, in her neighborhood, and in her home. In school, she was restless, fidgety, and seemed not interested in learning. In the neighborhood, she was irritable and got into fights with younger children. At home, she was negative and crabby and frequently complained about being sick.

Her father was a successful professional man and had little time to spend with his daughter. The mother was busy fulfilling herself and had become a full-time student at the university. The house was cared for by a series of housekeepers, none of whom stayed at the job very long.

Sometimes the parents, feeling a bit guilty about the lack of time spent with their daughter, would arrange a quick trip to Worlds of Fun in Kansas City. During such a time, they would buy their daughter almost everything she wanted in a frantic attempt to atone for their lack of time during the rest of the year.

After months of counseling, the parents came to understand how much their daughter wanted some of their time. They came to understand that her frequent stomach aches were really emotional aches. In a sense, she had to earn her parents' time through illness. They were not giving her their time as a gift. After a while, both parents started spending more time with her, and a marked change occurred. She complained less and became more pleasant to be with. As she became more agreeable, her parents began to enjoy her more. Her work in school improved, and she began to play well with her friends. The gift of time freely given can work miracles.

The gift of time is appreciated by anyone at any age. The story we read from the Bible earlier is about the giving and receiving of the gift of time. Martha thought she had no time to stop her busyness in order to be present with her guest, and she didn't want her sister Mary to have that kind of time to give either. It sounds like many of us during the season preceding Christmas each year.

When Martha complained to Jesus that she was having to do all the work, he replied, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled by many things." It was his way of saying, "Take some time, give me some of your time, relax, and also let me give you some of my time."

Always rushing around accomplishes little and leads to time pressure. A recent survey conducted among middle-aged adults in this country indicated that the sources of depression that most often sent them into despair and gloom were time pressure and fatigue.

This holiday season, give yourself the gift of time to relax, and give those you love the gift of time to be with them. They want your time more than they want the objects or other things you are rushing about to purchase or prepare.

There's a new "time-word" in our culture that puzzles me. We now talk of "quality time." I think I know what people mean when they use the term, but sometimes I wonder if we use the term as a cover-up for the fact that we have so little time for each other that we try to make up for it

by calling it quality time. Could it be that we are pretending that we can take care of our human relationships in convenient time?

I realize, of course, that measuring time spent with others only in terms of quantity is not sufficient. It is possible, of course, to spend a lot of time together with friends or with family and have it be destructive rather than constructive. If all our time together is spent fighting and being disagreeable, it's not worth much.

There's one more aspect to giving another the gift of time, and that is sometimes we need to give another person the time to be alone, or the time to grieve, or the time to adjust to change. One husband, for example, was initially very sympathetic with his wife when her mother died. Having always had an extremely close relationship with her mother, Helen, age 35, was shocked and almost numb following the death of her mother, who died suddenly.

During the funeral and for a couple of weeks afterward, her husband was concerned and understanding. After three weeks had passed, however, and Helen's grief did not seem to lift, her husband became gruff and harsh. "Why don't you snap out of it? It's gone on too long," he demanded. She replied, "If I could, I would. Let me alone. Give me time. I'm having trouble dealing with my grief." Frustrated and angered by his own inability to relieve his wife's grief on his time schedule, he became sullen. He did not give her the time that she needed to mourn the death of her mother.

The gift of time is precious. It's a gift each one of us can give. It's the gift that God continually gives to us. God never rushes us. God is always patient and waiting. During this holy season especially, give the gift of time. Amen.