Sunday, December 12, 1993
A GIFT THAT CHANGES PEOPLE (No. 3 in a Series: Priceless Gifts)
Luke 1:46-55

During this Advent season, as we prepare for Christmas, we're considering in this sermon series some priceless gifts that we can give to each other — gifts that cannot be purchased anywhere but can only be given with love. These are very personal gifts.

In the first sermon in this series, I suggested that we give the gift of a good example. That's what Jesus gave over and over again. Then, last week, in the second sermon of this series, I proposed that we each give the precious gift of time.

All of the priceless gifts I am recommending in this series cannot be purchased or earned. That's true of most of the most precious qualities in our life together — integrity, self-esteem, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, and love. These are truly gifts of the spirit.

Before we consider today's gift suggestion, here's a little bit of background preparation.

In a psychological experiment conducted a few years ago, the person conducting the experiment spoke to a selected group of teachers prior to the opening of school in the fall. He named some of the students as "academic sprinters" who were the most likely to achieve, but he made no comment about the other students in the classes. In reality, those who had been named as the best students had been chosen at random — they had previously shown no greater intellectual promise than the others in the group.

Amazingly, those students who were labeled as having the very best intellectual potential fulfilled the prophecy. At the end of the year, when all of the students were tested, they showed more evidence of intellectual gain and achievement.

In another experiment conducted with a group of youngsters in Philadelphia, it was found that children were more likely to learn to swim when their swimming instructors were told that these particular children were especially ready to learn and had a high potential for becoming excellent swimmers.

As I read about these research projects, they reminded me of a man I knew some years back. I first met this person when he was about 35 years old. He was then a depressed business executive. He wanted to leave a very fine job in a company in order to become a part-time tennis instructor at a newly built indoor tennis club. His wife had spoken to me earlier and complained that each time her husband seemed to be getting ahead, each time he began to experience some success in a position, he would shift gears and decide he wanted to do something else. Failure was easier for him to handle than success.

As I got to know this young man better, he said to me one day—"I guess my wife is right. Each time I start becoming successful, I get depressed. It seems like I'm more comfortable when things aren't going well. I've always thought of myself as a failure, and I guess I'm doing everything possible to make that view of myself come true."

As he remembered his childhood, he recalled how his father would shout, "You're a failure," when he brought home a poor report card. "You're a failure," his dad screamed when the boy lost his job as a paper boy because he forgot to deliver some papers one afternoon. He

remembered a number of similar incidents as he was growing up. Soon he accepted the failure label, and in so doing, he began to act out his life in the same role.

Some years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma, doctors discovered a 17-year-old boy with the IQ of a genius who had spent two-thirds of his life in a school for the mentally retarded. There was nothing wrong with the young man's mind, a routine examination quickly revealed, but he did have an undisclosed characteristic. He was deaf.

The child had been sent to a state institution in Enid, Oklahoma at the age of five, but later had been transferred to another institution near Tulsa, a modern school that emphasized remedial rather than custodial care. The young man's true mental state was revealed when an employee left a transistor radio kit on a work table, and the young genius, after studying intricate wiring designs which he could not read, assembled the radio kit, which played perfectly.

What had happened was that the child had been so bright all of his life that he had quickly learned how he thought he was supposed to act, and so he acted like the mentally retarded children all around him. He had no other models to follow. Being deaf and alone, he went along as best he knew how — by adjusting to his environment. Once he got help by being able to attend a special school for the deaf, he blossomed and is now an outstanding student with a brilliant future.

Isn't it amazing how we human beings are often shaped by the expectations of those who are close to us? If those closest to me from little on up see me as a failure and expect me to fail, I may very well follow that pattern. If those around me see me and treat me as being mentally retarded, I may very well act that way.

There is a very precious gift involved in all of this — it is the gift of seeing the best in people. So this Christmas, if you want to give a truly valuable gift, one that will change people for the better, try giving those you love and those you work with the gift of seeing the best in them. More often than not, their behavior will move closer to your expectation.

Another way of saying this is that most of the time, prophecies made about people, if they are repeated enough, tend to be self-fulfilling. Without being aware of it, those of us who are parents very often give this gift to our children. Hopefully, the gift is positive, but sometimes it is negative.

Can you hear yourself in any of these statements? "You're always so clumsy." "You're a bad girl." "You're so messy that you are a pig." "If you don't change your behavior, you're going to grow up to be a bum." "Can't you do anything right?" "You're a failure."

We can see the worst in people, or we can see the best. Can you hear yourself in any of these statements? "You're a wonderful person." "You're fun to be with." "You got an A in spelling, that's terrific." "You're such a good parent to your children." "I'm glad that you are a part of our family."

When we see the best in people, we help them develop and build on their strengths, and by so doing, we are giving them a beautiful and priceless gift.

Jesus knew about this gift long before psychology books were written. I'm also sure that Mary and Joseph, his mother and father, saw the best in him. Even before Jesus was born, Mary

knew he would be a blessing to all who met him, and she must've reminded him of that over and over again.

When Jesus began to heal and teach, he continually gave the gift of seeing the good in others. And when he saw the good in them, they began to see the good in themselves. When we see the good in others, we are seeing in them the "God-image" in which they were created.

Take, for example, Zacchaeus. According to Luke's story, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a collaborator with the Romans. Very few of the people around him saw any good in him at all. They saw only a greedy traitor.

With Jesus, it was different. When he came to the place where Zacchaeus was in the tree, he looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for I must stay at your house today. I'm going to eat at your table and be your guest." He climbed down in a hurry and received his guest joyfully.

It was probably the first time in a long time that anyone had seen anything good in Zacchaeus. Luke doesn't describe the conversation that went on that day at the dinner table, but we do know that as a result, Zacchaeus was on the way to becoming a changed man. He began to behave according to the best that was in him and not the worst. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor and also promised that he would restore fourfold the money to those he had cheated in his tax collecting.

Jesus always looked for and found the best in the people he met. He found the best not only in Zacchaeus but in Mary Magdalene, in Peter and Andrew, James and John, and countless others. What a beautiful and life-changing gift to give.

This gift of seeing the best in people can be given to anyone at any time. It will always do some good.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit a clinic that worked with severely retarded children. The clinic had a good staff, and they all did what they could to help the children who were brought to them. The staff was composed of social workers, pediatricians, psychologists, and psychiatrists. I remember one psychiatrist in particular because he was continually giving the gift of seeing the best in people. No matter how severely impaired a child was, he would always come up with some suggestions that would build on the child's strengths, on what was best in them. He never focused on a child's weaknesses but always on what the child could do.

Once he helped the staff understand that a very severely retarded 8-year-old could probably be helped to learn to tie her own shoelaces if someone patiently worked with her. Another time he helped the staff understand that if the parents of a 12-year-old would handle their child differently, he could be toilet-trained and then would be able to attend school. In each of these cases and more, it worked. As he helped others to give the gift of seeing the best in children, those same children actually began to change and to develop some of those capabilities. This priceless gift ranges far and wide. Not only can we give this gift to others in a personal way by seeing what is best in them and helping them to build on their strengths, but at the same time, we are helping by seeing the possibilities in any given situation rather than only the problem itself. It's a valuable gift to someone when we can begin to help them see the best rather than only the worst in a predicament.

It's important because how one views a situation will most of the time largely determine how one responds to it. Take the inevitable issue of growing older. All of us do it, but how we respond to aging depends on whether we see it as a problem or an opportunity.

It's natural, I suppose, to be warned to expect all sorts of problems that go along with growing older. But if we focus only on that point of view, all is negative. The fact is, if you expect a crisis, you are more likely to get one.

The gift of seeing the best in a situation or in people is a beautiful gift, and there's an added dividend to this gift: it also makes the giver a more beautiful person. The more you give this gift of seeing the best in people, the more you begin to discover the best in yourself.

Remember, to give this priceless gift, we need to resist the urge to put people into pigeonholes, or narrow limiting categories, or apply labels to them. Jesus had the unique ability to always see beyond the label.

Why is it so tempting for us to classify people into narrow categories? He's an athlete. She's a brain. He's a musician. She's a conservative. He's a liberal. With such labels, we can narrow our vision of a person, and this can keep us from seeing other characteristics that are also an important part of that person's total makeup. Labels too quickly applied tend to keep us from seeing other gifts the person also possesses.

As I said earlier in this sermon, by giving the gift of seeing the best in someone, you are, at the same time, seeing in them the God-image in which each one of us is created.

Jesus knew that each one of us is a child of God. He also knew that because God's love continually flows through creation and in each one of us, life is forever biased on the side of healing, on the side of the good. And when you begin to see the good in others and in yourself, amazing things can and will unfold.

This Advent and Christmas season, and next year too, you can follow the example of Jesus and give the gift of seeing the best in people and thereby discover the best that is in you. Amen.