Sunday, December 13, 1998
BETTER THAN EXPECTED
Matthew 11:2-11

Some gifts we receive during the Christmas season and at other times in our lives turn out to be different and better than we expected. In other words, when we received the gift, we did not realize how valuable it was.

There was a young man who attended the University of Kansas. One day he got a letter from his dad. In the letter, his dad said that he was coming to visit him in a few weeks because it was his son's 21st birthday, and he was going to bring him a very special birthday gift. The young man could hardly wait for his birthday to arrive. What was the gift going to be? Maybe it would be the car he had always wanted or a new set of golf clubs?

Several weeks later, when his dad arrived, they went to a local restaurant for dinner to celebrate the young man's 21st birthday. Following the meal, his dad took out his billfold and extracted a well-worn small card. All the card said on it was: "I AM THIRD." He gave the card to his son and said, "This card was given to me years ago by someone I respected very much. I've carried it with me for more than 30 years, and every time I've faced major decisions in my life, I've taken out the card and looked at it. It has done more for me than anything else I've ever had. Since it's your 21st birthday, it's time I gave the card to you. I hope you will keep and treasure it as I have."

"What do the words on the card mean?" asked the young man. "It's very simple," said his dad, "'I am third' means: God first, others second, and I am third. Although I've not been especially outwardly religious in my life, the words on this card have been a guiding principle for me. I hope it will be the same for you." The young man took the card from his dad and did his best to hide his disappointment. It was not the kind of gift he was expecting.

That night, after his dad left the campus and he returned to his dormitory room, he took the card and tacked it on the bulletin board in his room above his desk. That way, every day he would have to look at the card, but he still did not understand the full significance of the gift.

When his friends would come to visit, some of them would ask about the card and its meaning. He would briefly tell them the story of how it was a gift from his dad and what it had meant to him. Bill Easton was the track coach at the University of Kansas in the late 1950s and 1960s, and somehow this card with its saying found its way to his desk. Maybe the young man who received the card from his dad was Bill Easton — I'm not sure. Dale Turner, who for years was Senior Minister at Plymouth Church near the campus of the University of Kansas, told me this story years ago. When I telephoned him this past week for some of the missing details, he said he had forgotten some of the missing links as well.

In spite of the missing links, we do know this: the card continued to have its positive influence. In 1961, a young star football player from Omaha entered the University of Kansas on a football scholarship. His name is Gale Sayers. During his college days, he broke all sorts of records and then went on to a blazing career in professional football with the Chicago Bears. In 1970, he wrote a book about his life and gave it the title, I AM THIRD.

In this book, he tells how extremely nervous he would get before each game, especially during his rookie year. He writes, "In my rookie year with the Bears, I would vomit before every game.

I considered for a long time going to a hypnotist… I had to do something because I was going out on the field tired and beat. I decided I had to stop vomiting. And somehow, I did. But the nervous tension was always there."

"Several years later, before an especially big game, I sat in the locker room like I was in a trance. I was wearing my white game pants with the orange piping down the side. I had my cleats on, but I was still in my T-shirt. I felt for the gold medallion dangling around my neck. It seemed so heavy at that moment, but it was comforting to have it there. The medallion is the size of a half-dollar, and on it is an inscription: 'I AM THIRD.'"

"In college, my track coach was Bill Easton. He had a tremendous influence on me. It was Bill Easton who taught me about work. Because of him, I did things I never thought I could do."

"The first time I went into Coach Easton's office, when I was a sophomore, I saw a card, like a placard, on his desk: 'I AM THIRD.' Just a little thing on his desk. And for two years I wondered what it meant. So finally, I asked him. He said, 'God first, others second, and I am third.'"

"When I was in my second year with the Bears, I decided I wanted to wear something meaningful around my neck, like a religious medal. I'd been thinking about that saying ever since I'd met Bill Easton, so I decided to have it put on a medallion, and I have worn it ever since."

"This saying made sense. It held a lot of meaning for me. It is a good philosophy of life. I try to live by it."

It was this motto, "I AM THIRD," that continued to guide the life of Gale Sayers. It helped him in his close friendship with his professional football team roommate, Brian Piccolo, who died of cancer during his football career. The story of the strong friendship between Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo was made into a movie called Brian's Song. And it all began with that little card that a father gave his son for his 21st birthday.

Every time I think of this story, I am aware that there have been many gifts that I have received which, at the time, I was not aware of their value or significance. Only later did I come to realize their true worth.

As I look back on my childhood and growing up, I realize that some of the greatest gifts my parents gave me were their time, the security of a loving home, and the knowledge that I was loved and accepted not only by them but by God.

Think of the many gifts in your life that you have received which have turned out to be much better than you expected.

In addition to the motto, "I AM THIRD," Gale Sayers said that his marriage turned out to be a gift of much more value than he could ever have anticipated. "Marriage bailed me out. It was the only thing that bailed me out. I doubt that I would have finished college if I hadn't gotten married. Marriage helped settle me down. And my grades improved 150%. Linda was the big factor because she had determination, she had drive, and she gave stability to my life."

The gift of God in the person of Jesus was certainly quite different than many people expected — and much better. It was so different that John the Baptist, who had helped prepare the way for God's gift, had doubts about Jesus.

John had been put in prison because, in his preaching, he had criticized some of the government leaders. In jail, he had plenty of time to think, and he kept getting reports about this Jesus whom he had baptized and in whom he had put so much hope. Although large crowds were following Jesus, what John had heard about Him didn't match his expectations of what the Messiah would be and do.

He kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, forgiving sinners, eating with outcasts, and going to parties. He heard that Jesus had eaten in the home and at the same table with a tax collector and that, at a wedding, He had turned water into wine. His enemies were calling Jesus a wine-bibber and a glutton.

In prison, John began to think, "This is not the gift from God that I expected. Did I make a mistake? Did God make a mistake?"

So John sent some of his followers to investigate. They came to Jesus and asked, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." In other words, Jesus was saying, "John will have to decide for himself whether or not I am a valuable gift from God, even though the gift is not exactly what he expected."

John had anticipated a different kind of Messiah. He had described the Savior primarily as a judge who would be stern and demanding. He had threatened his audience with fire and brimstone. In addition, he had lived a totally different kind of life than Jesus. He had taken a vow of poverty and lived in the wilderness. He never attended parties or ate with outcasts. He had assumed the Messiah would follow his pattern.

John the Baptist was discovering what we all have to learn — that there is often a big difference between our idea of a thing and the thing itself. If you are a parent, you have discovered that your idea of what having and raising a child is going to be is quite different from the experience itself.

When John's followers reported back to him what Jesus had told them, the Bible does not tell us what his response was. But from later history, we can assume that John was willing to change his view and accept Jesus as Savior, even though He was different than he had expected.

But what about us? Most of us have some idea in mind, some picture in our head, as to the kind of person Jesus was, and we have some concept of what God is and how God works in the world. But we always need to be open to the possibility that God is more than we expect — and better than we had anticipated.

One of the most helpful books ever written on the subject is by J.B. Phillips. Its title is Your God Is Too Small. In this classic, Phillips demonstrates how frequently our ideas of God are too limited and parochial. Thus, when God enters our lives in some unexpected way, we can miss God altogether. Or we might have experienced God but, at the time, did not realize how significant it was, just like the young man who received the card from his dad which said, "I AM THIRD." There are many gifts which we receive throughout our lives that turn out to be better than expected.

I suspect that one reason our culture loves Christmas so much is because almost everyone loves Jesus as a baby. That's part of the irresistible pull on the minds and hearts of people.

But it can also be a liability. We can become so entranced with the beautiful story of a baby in a manger that we miss the rest of the story. It's easy to be charmed with the story of a baby and grow very sentimental about it. It doesn't ask us to do very much. There's a tendency, therefore, for some people to keep Jesus as a baby in a manger. That way, He can't easily call our way of thinking or acting into question.

This is not to deny the importance of the Christmas story — the story that reminds us that God entered our world as a newborn baby in the same way that all of us enter the world. But we miss the total value of the gift unless we also remember that He grew up into an adult. It is His whole life, including His death and resurrection, that continues to call into question our priorities.

I knew a man who had a well-to-do aunt who was very fond of him when he was a little baby and child. Since she lived a long distance away, she had seen him only twice in the past 15 years. But she continued to send him a birthday card and present each year, although the gifts continued to be suitable for a child of 6 to 12 years old. She could never quite accept the fact that he had become an adult.

Each year the young man would pass the gift to some needy youngster who could use it. As an adult, he became part of a group ministry that lived and worked in the slums of a large city. His aunt could never understand what happened to that sweet little baby boy and child she loved so much. Why did he have to grow up and change? She never realized that he became even better than anyone anticipated.

There was a mother who was having a difficult time explaining the nature of God to her young daughter, who was confused by the stories of war and destruction in parts of the Old Testament. The mother read to her from some of the later prophets: "What does God require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Then she read to her daughter from the New Testament: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God." One day the daughter said to her, "Mom, it seems to me that God grew better as God grew older." That's one way of saying it.

Another way is to say that God grows better as we come into a more mature knowledge of God.

Each one of us receives so many gifts in life. Many of them, when we first receive them, do not seem to be very much. But as we grow and mature, we will discover that many of these gifts are better than we ever expected. We will also discover that many of the simple, intangible gifts we give to others will have more far-reaching power than we could ever have anticipated. Amen.