Sunday, December 17, 2000
PRICELESS GIFTS (No. 2 in a Series)
Matthew 1:18-24

In this season of gift-giving, there are priceless gifts that you can give and receive, but you cannot purchase them in a store because they are very personal gifts. Last week in the first sermon in this series, I suggested that you consider giving the gift of the past — that is, the gift of your family's history and the gift of the heritage of the Christian faith to those you love and especially to those in your family. You will have to be creative and decide in what way you are going to give this precious gift.

A second priceless and precious gift you can give to others is the gift of the present. It too is a very personal gift and cannot be bought anywhere. To give someone the gift of the present is to give a part of yourself. It is always a gift of love. It is the gift of your undivided attention. It is the gift of your presence. It is a gift that is given in the here and now, instead of something promised in the future. It is the gift of being with someone in the same way that God is with us. Jesus, as God's gift, is described in the birth stories with the designation "Emmanuel," which literally means "God is with us," or as the Gospel of John proclaims, "The love of God became a human being and dwells among us."

A man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years came home from work one day to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke. She was rushed to the hospital, but in spite of the best available medical attention, she died without regaining consciousness a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband, in shock and grief, told his best friend, "Do you know what the worst thing is about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this world, and I never told her. I always told myself that one day I would let her know how much I loved her, but I kept putting it off."

It's an all-too-familiar story. We frequently do not give one of the most precious gifts we can give — the gift of the present, which is to take time today to tell someone how much we love them, or to take time today to be with someone we love, or someone who needs us, or to write someone a note, or make a phone call. But we keep putting these things off, telling ourselves that we will do them tomorrow, or the next day, or whenever we have more time — and then one day it's too late.

The gift of the present is the gift of time. Over and over again, I hear parents lament the fact, especially fathers, that they did not give their children the gift of the present, meaning the gift of their presence — the gift of their time, particularly when the children were young.

One man who was divorced after 20 years of marriage described to me 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 home, the son says, "It's really much better having you and mom divorced." When the father asks why, the son replies, "When you were married, you were always so busy and worried about your work and making up lists of everything you had to do. Now I've finally made your list."

A counselor described a nine-year-old boy he was working with who had a severe behavioral problem at school, in his neighborhood, and at home. In school, he was restless, fidgety, and seemed not to be much interested in learning. In the neighborhood, he was irritable and got

into many fights with younger children. At home, he was negative and crabby and frequently complained about being sick. His father was a successful lawyer and had little time to spend with his son. The mother was busy and had become a full-time student at the university. The house was cared for by a series of housekeepers, none of whom stayed very long at the job.

Sometimes the parents, feeling guilty about the lack of time spent with their son, would arrange a quick overnight trip to one of the several amusement parks like “Worlds of Fun” in Kansas City. During such a period, they would buy their son almost everything he 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 badly their son wanted the gift of their presence. They came to appreciate that his frequent stomachaches were emotional pains. Intuitively, the boy knew all along that if he was ill, his parents would show care and give him time. In a sense, he had to earn his parents’ time through his illness. They were not giving their presence as a gift.

After a while, when both parents started to spend more time with him, a marked change occurred. He complained less and became more pleasant. As he became more agreeable, his parents began to enjoy him more and wanted to spend more time with him. His work at school improved, and he began to get along with his friends. The gift of the present, freely given, can work miracles.

We not only need to give the gift of the present to others, but we need to give it to ourselves — and that means learning to live in the present and to enjoy the present. It’s easy to forget the importance of the present when we spend a lot of time waiting for something. When we’re very young, we can hardly wait to become a teenager. We especially look forward to the time when we will be 16 and can get our driver’s license. Then we wait eagerly for the time when we will be 18, 19, or 21. It’s okay to look forward with anticipation to the future, but at the same time, appreciate and enjoy the present.

No matter what our age, we do a lot of waiting. Conditions are never quite right to suit us. Some who are not married wait for marriage, and some who are married wait for divorce or hope to find the key that will make their marriage work. Others wait for the time when they will have children. And some can hardly wait for the time when the children will be grown and gone from home.

A certain amount of waiting can never be eliminated from our lives. Much of the waiting we do is necessary and cannot be avoided. It becomes a problem if in our waiting, we do not fully enjoy and appreciate the present.

Some of our sisters and brothers in the Christian faith tend to live only in the past or in the future and forget the present. They live primarily in the past when they keep looking back to the good old days of the church in the first century or some other century. They imagine there was a kind of golden age of Christianity. They find difficulty in relating their faith to their present circumstances.

Others look forward to the time when Jesus will return again so they can receive their reward by being taken into paradise while they watch the non-believers receive their eternal punishment — and they forget about living in the present. To proclaim only an Advent future — Christ is coming — or an Advent past — Christ has come — without living in the present exposes a bankruptcy in personal faith and the church’s mission.

About 220 years ago, the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May, and the delegates were able to do their work by natural light. But then something happened that nobody expected. Right in the middle of the debate, there was an eclipse of the sun, and everything turned to darkness. Some legislators thought it was the Second Coming, so a clamor arose. People wanted to adjourn. People wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

But the Speaker of the House had a different idea. He was a Christian believer, and he rose to the occasion with good logic and good faith. “We are all upset by the darkness,” he said, “and some of us are afraid. But the day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought.” They went back to their desks and resumed their work.

It’s not a new religious issue. The prophet Jeremiah had to deal with the same tendency. Our ancestors in the faith, the Jews, had been deported from their own country and were living in exile in Babylon. Their main hope was to return as soon as possible to their homeland, and there were false prophets who had been fueling their hopes with the idea that they would return soon.

Jeremiah knew this wasn’t going to happen. They would be able to return someday, of this he was sure, but it wouldn’t be in the near future. They therefore faced the problem of what to do in the present, the meantime. He gave them some astonishing advice: “Don’t act like transients. Don’t just camp out. Settle down. Build houses, plant gardens, plan marriages for your children, expand your families, and above all, pray to God for the welfare of Babylon, for your welfare will depend on her welfare.” In other words, while you are waiting, in the meantime, in the present, there are a lot of positive things you can do.

Imagine! The Jews in captivity, according to Jeremiah, are to build, to plant, and to pray. He did not tell the people to give up all hope of ever returning to their homeland. In fact, he promised them that one day they would return — but he stressed that in the meantime, they were to go about the normal business of living. And most important, he assured them that as they went about building, planting, and praying, God would be with them as much in Babylon as in their homeland. They needed to live in the present. God is not a God of one place, or of the past or the future. God’s love and care are not tied down to any one location or time in our lives or to one period in history.

The clue to living in the present is to take hold where you are, bloom where you are planted, and do the things that are necessary. If you want your life to have purpose and joy, it does not help to wallow in the thought of what might have been; rather, you are to build on what is needed and possible where you are here and now.

One of the most important messages of this Advent and Christmas season is found in the name “Emmanuel,” which means God is with us. Therefore, the present is as important and God-filled as the past or the future. Live in the present! God is there. Give the gift of the present to others. Don’t confine yourself to the past or the future. Will Rogers said, “Never let yesterday use up too much of today.” I would add, “Never let tomorrow use up too much of today.” Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he said, “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own troubles be sufficient for today.”

The gift of the present is about loving and being loved. It is about savoring the beauty of moments here and now. It is about being totally present with people and listening to them rather than always thinking ahead about what you are going to be doing next. The gift of the present is one of the most precious gifts we can give to others and to ourselves.

A teacher decided to honor each one of her seniors in high school by telling them the difference each had made. She called each student to the front of her class, one at a time, and told each one and the class how that student had made a difference to her and the class. Then she presented each one of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters, which read, "Who I Am Makes A Difference." She also gave each student three more ribbons and asked them to go out and make similar awards to others.

One of the young men in the class went to a junior executive in a nearby company and honored him for helping him with his career planning. He gave him a blue ribbon and put it on his shirt. Then he gave him the two extra ribbons and said, "We're doing a class project on recognition, and we'd like you to find someone to honor. Give that person a blue ribbon and the extra one so that it can be passed on. If possible, let me know what happens."

Later that day, the junior executive went in to see his boss, who was known as kind of a grouchy person. He sat his boss down and told him that he deeply admired him and asked him if he would accept the gift of the blue ribbon. His boss said he would be honored to accept the ribbon.

The junior executive took the ribbon and pinned it on his boss's jacket, gave him the last extra blue ribbon, and said, "Do me a favor. Take this extra blue ribbon and pass it on by honoring someone. The young man who first gave me the ribbons is doing a project in school, and we want to keep the recognition ceremony going and find out how it affects people."

That night, the boss came home to his 14-year-old son and sat him down. He said, "The most incredible thing happened to me today. I was in my office, and one of the junior executives came in and told me how much he admired me and gave me a blue ribbon for being a creative manager. Imagine, he thinks I'm creative. Then he put this blue ribbon on me and gave me an extra one and asked me to honor someone else. As I was driving home tonight, I started thinking about whom I would honor with this ribbon, and I thought about you. I want to honor you and give you my blessing. My days are hectic, and when I come home, I don't pay much attention to you. Too often I've only found fault with you, but tonight I want you to know you do make a difference to me. In addition to your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You're a wonderful young man, and I love you."

The startled young man started to sob and sob, and he couldn't stop crying. His whole body shook. He looked at his dad and said through his tears, "I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, dad, because I didn't think you loved me. Now, I don't need to."

This year, this season, give the gift of the present. It is God's gift to you. Pass it on. Amen.