Sunday, November 27, 2005
THE GIFT OF A GOOD ROLE MODEL (No. 1 in an Advent Series: Gifts from Jesus)
John 13:3-5,12-17

You can see the advertisements everywhere reminding you that this is the season of giving. Therefore, for many people, it's the season of buying because buying and giving gifts often go together. A question you frequently hear during this season is, "Have you done your Christmas shopping?" Another is, "What do you want for Christmas? Give me some suggestions."

I have to confess that I'm not a very creative Christmas shopper. I have trouble deciding what gifts to buy for my wife and other members of the family. They also tell me that they struggle with ideas for me. Like most of you, I enjoy receiving and giving gifts. I look forward to the Christmas neckties I expect to get and to the other unexpected gifts.

This might sound strange coming from a minister, but I get tired of hearing so many denunciations of the "commercialization" of Christmas. Editorials are written, and sermons are delivered accusing individuals and businesses of crowding Christ out of Christmas. I hear people say, "If only we could have a real Christmas, the good old kind: quiet, inexpensive, simple, devout. If only we could retrieve the holiday from the hands of the vulgar money-grubbers."

At times, I do find the excesses of the Christmas season ridiculous and disturbing. But at the same time, I believe many complaints about the commercialization of Christmas are unconsciously hypocritical nonsense. I am not ashamed to admit that if I had to spend Christmas somewhere far from the crowds and joyous festivities, I wouldn't like it.

In the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1659, the citizens were so afraid of celebrating Christmas that the following law was passed: "Whosoever shall be found observing Christmas, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or in any other way, shall be fined 5 shillings." That was long before Christmas became commercialized as it is now.

My point here is that while there is something that can be called the "commercialization" of Christmas, the church's response should not be a prophetic attack but a patient pastoral attempt to help people deal with the special problems raised by commercialization.

Here's the truth: there is no way that you can crowd Christ out of Christmas. You also cannot keep God out of your life. Many years ago, the Psalmist wrote: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for the darkness is as light to you" (Psalm 139:7-12).

There is a sense in which commercialization has a good, almost sacramental side. It brings beautifully decorated stores and streets, harmless, pleasant music, and if you live where December is wintertime, evening shopping in the snow. The Advent-Christmas season also brings beautiful worship services with familiar Advent-Christmas carols.

The real meaning of Christmas is that God has entered this world and lives among us in everyday life: in shopping centers, factories, ghettos, and schools.

Perhaps the root of some complaints about the commercialization of Christmas is that people fall into the dangerous habit of thinking that religion is somehow ruined by contact with real people who have real problems. A friend of mine said that you can learn a lot about patience and love of neighbor by standing in line at the Post Office this time of year. It's always easier, if you're not doing very well spiritually, to insist that the secular world is holding you back.

Now back to the theme of this sermon series—"Gifts from Jesus." The first gift he gives, and which you can give to others, especially at this time of year, is "The Gift of a Good Role Model." That's where the Bible story from the gospel of John that you heard earlier fits in.

What the early followers of Jesus remembered most about their teacher, and what affected them the most, was the example he set for them. He was the ultimate role model.

According to the story in the Gospel of John, during the evening of the last supper with his disciples, he got up from the table and washed their feet. When he finished, he told them, "If I, your teacher and leader, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash the feet of each other." Then he said, "I have given you an example. You should do as I have done to you." He was telling them with this example — you need to be loving servants to one another and to all people you meet.

This was not the only time he gave the gift of being a good role model to his followers. They remembered how he treated outcasts with dignity and respect. They remembered how forgiving he was of others. He was their role model as they carried on their ministry after his death and resurrection. Each one of you can give the gift of being a good role model this Advent and Christmas season and each day of your life. It's a priceless gift for the people to whom you give it.

The truth is you are giving the gift of a role model all the time. You must be sure that it's the gift of a good role model. Some years ago, I was helping a young woman who was anxious and afraid of almost everything. She worried about doing a good job where she worked. She worried all the time about whether or not people liked her. She worried about getting sick. She even worried because she worried all the time. During one of our conversations, she said, "I'm like my mother. She worried the same way I do. Do you think I learned it from her?"

I replied, "It's quite possible. Children learn attitudes from their parents, and those attitudes are learned not so much by what people say but by a process of imitating someone you respect and love." This young woman had learned from her mother, as she was growing up, to see the scary possibilities in every new situation. When she was young and would go to a birthday party, she remembered her mother always anxiously asked whether or not there were any children present who had colds. When she took swimming lessons, her mother would usually be more interested in whether the pool was properly supervised than in finding out how much she learned or encouraging her and being proud of her progress.

As a teenager, she was scared by her mother's stories of young women who were harmed because they stayed out too late or went to parties that were not properly supervised. The daughter naturally imitated her mother as she was growing up. In this case, the mother was not a very good role model.

On the other hand, the mother could have given her daughter a most valuable gift — the gift of being a good role model. Think about your own behavior, especially during this season of giving and receiving. How do you treat people? How do you talk about others at home? Do you find yourself shouting angrily at your children? Are you surprised when they shout back? All people are by nature selfish and greedy. “I have given you an example,” said Jesus. How often the disciples must have recalled not only those words but the living example of him in their lives.

There are so many gifts of good role models you can give. How you prepare and celebrate Advent and Christmas can be the gift of a good role model. How you deal with disappointment and failure can be the gift of a good example.

What a wonderful gift it is in return when someone, for whom you have been a good role model, tells you what it has meant in his or her life. This past week, I was discussing this sermon theme with a friend. She said, “I know exactly what you mean. I wrote my dad a letter earlier this year to tell him what a good role model he had been for me in my life. My letter was my birthday gift to him. Now I’m especially glad that I wrote it because he died several months later, and part of my letter to him was included in his funeral service. I learned from another family member that he considered my letter to be one of the best gifts he had ever received. If I had not written that letter to him, he would never have known what a good role model he was for me and that it was his most precious gift to me.”

My friend gave me permission to quote what she said in her letter to her dad:

“Dear Dad, I am writing to thank you for all the gifts you have given me over the years. They are things I will cherish forever. You have been my most influential role model. You gave me the gift of laughter. I learned to laugh from you. Learning to laugh has helped me overcome many obstacles in life. You gave me the gift of being a caring, compassionate, and giving person. I learned from you that it is more blessed to give than to receive. As my role model, you gave me the gift of a good work ethic. You also taught me to appreciate the everyday gifts in life — sunsets, reading a good book, taking a walk, and enjoying our meals together as a family. I remember and cherish the conversations we’ve had and how much I learned from your patient listening. We didn’t choose each other, but you chose to help me grow and mature into an adult who loves the life I’ve been given. Over the years, you’ve modeled good standards for me to live by. You’ve taught me, by your example, to be honest, friendly, happy, and loving. These are treasures that cannot be given a monetary value. They are priceless, and they will always be a part of me. In that way, you will always be with me.”

What a gift of being a good role model this dad gave to his daughter. And what a gift in return he received from her. This Advent and Christmas season, begin by receiving the gift of a good role model from God. That gift is Jesus. Then do as he did and give the gift of being a good role model to others. Also remember this — you are the only “Christ” some people will see this Christmas. He will live in others if he lives through you. Don’t just welcome Christ this Christmas, be Christ to others. It can be the best and most priceless gift you have ever given anyone. Amen.