Sunday November 27, 2005

THE GIFT OF A GOOD ROLE MODEL

John 13:3-5, 12-17
No. 1 in an Advent Sermon Series:
"Gifts from Jesus"

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. Therefore, a question you hear frequently during this season is, "Have you done your Christmas shopping?" Another question 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 have even more

difficulty in finding gifts for me. In spite of these obstacles, like most of you, I enjoy receiving and giving gifts. I look forward to the Christmas neckties which I expect to get and to the other unexpected gifts.

This might sound strange to you 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 saying, "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 moneygrubbers."

As a follower of Jesus, I do find facets of the Christmas season ridiculous and disturbing, but at the same time I believe most of the 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 the 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 now is. Christmas was not a

legal holiday in Massachusetts until 1856.

My thesis 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 a sacramental side. It brings beautifully decorated stores and streets, harmless, pleasant music, and if you live where December is winter-time, evening shopping in the snow. The Advent-Christmas season also brings beautiful worship services with familiar Advent-Christmas carols.

Furthermore the ultimate 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 some people fall into the dangerous habit of thinking that religion is somehow ruined by contact with real people with 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 at this time of year. It's always easier, if you're not doing very well spiritually, to insist that the secularizing 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 the outcasts with dignity and respect. They remembered how forgiving he was of others. He was their role model as they carried on their own 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 an

everlasting gift because it will live on and on in the people to whom you give it.

The truth is you are giving a gift of a role model all the time. You have to 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 was 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?"

"Perhaps," I replied. "Many of our emotional 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 asked anxiously whether or not there were any children present who had colds. When she was a bit older and took swimming lessons, she recalled 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 raped because they stayed out too late or went to parties not properly supervised. The daughter naturally imitated her mother as she was growing up. The mother in this case was not a very good role model.

On the other hand, the mother could've given her daughter a most valuable gift, the gift of 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.

What kind of role model are you for overcoming greed?

"I have given you an example," said Jesus. How often the disciples must've 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

some friends of mine. One friend said to me, "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 want to thank you for all the things 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 have 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.

Most of all I want to thank you for being my dad. I didn't choose you and you didn't choose me, but you did choose to help me grow and mature into an adult who loves the life that has been given me. 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. 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.