

12.24.09

The Gift of Presence

Luke 2:1-20

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

As it is for many people, Christmas time is one of our family's favorite times of the year. We enjoy the worship, music, and decorations in church. Our tree and decorations at home, the lights you see when you drive around at night illuminating the darkness. Getting together with friends and family, the kids having time off from school, receiving Christmas cards from friends all over the country, going Christmas caroling, eating good food – these are all part of the fun for us.

There are two things that many of us look forward to at Christmas - the gifts and the presents. Let me clarify that – folks look forward to giving and receiving gifts and we also look forward to the **presence** of loved ones, many of whom we may not have seen for some time. Depending on how many folks we may be seeing, there can also be stress about getting gifts for everyone. Have any of you gotten to the point where you just don't like to go through the hassle of getting Christmas presents? I like the story of the kind 90-year-old grandmother who found buying presents for her family and friends a bit much one Christmas, so she wrote out checks to place in all of their Christmas cards. In each card she wrote, "*Buy your own present*" and then sent them off. When she got home after the family Christmas celebration was over, she found the checks on her desk! Everyone had gotten a Christmas card from her with "*Buy your own present*" written inside, but without the checks!

I would like to share a few words with you about the gift of presence. Most of us, especially when we are young, think about presents we can unwrap and play with or perhaps wear. I understand that. Who doesn't like to receive presents? However, the older you get and the more stuff you accumulate, the more you may realize that there are more valuable gifts. We may look forward more to seeing people than any present we get underneath the Christmas tree.

Christmas is first of all about God choosing to be present with us in Jesus. Mary and Joseph apparently didn't have any family support even though they had journeyed to the home of his ancestors for the census. Who was present for them? They were homeless so Mary had to give birth in very humble conditions. It was the shepherds who shared the angel's amazing message and gave the couple comfort, reassurance, and hope. The words they spoke stayed with Mary and she pondered and treasured them for the rest of her life. The shepherds didn't bring any gold, frankincense,

or myrrh, but they gave a gift that was possibly more valuable – they gave the gift of their presence. That is a gift so many people need today as well.

Monday night was the first day of winter and the longest night of the year. My wife Jill and I attended the National Homeless Person's Memorial Day service at The Federated Church in Hyannis. This year's service remembered the lives of nine people who died here on the Cape, including two Jill knew. As we walked out of the church into the frigid cold, I thought how awful it would be to stay outside all night. We think how pretty the snow looks and that we have a white Christmas, for those with no place to stay, like Mary and Joseph, it is a different story. But the hopeful part of the evening was that the church hall was filled for the service, there were people standing all around because there weren't enough seats. Homeless folks, advocates, case workers, pastors, all kinds of caring individuals, were there and I thought what a blessing that there are so many people sharing the gift of themselves.

There is no greater gift God has given than the gift of Jesus and his presence with us. A great gift we can give at Christmas or any day of the year is the gift of our presence. I want to encourage you to think about giving the gift of your presence in a few particular ways. As I have thought about my mom who died at the end of September and why she touched the lives of so many people I think it is because she was great at sharing the gift of her presence. She did a few things that anyone can do if we choose to.

First, she simply made it a priority to spend time with people. If someone is important in your life, you can make the time to be with them. You might have to change things in your life to make the time, but it's worth it. Beyond just making the time, though, you have to actually be present when you spend time with someone. That means learning to stay in the moment, rather than having your mind on other things, checking your cell phone or Blackberry every two minutes and texting away or trying to take care of other tasks and chores while spending time with them. Instead, stop everything else and focus on being there with your loved ones — really be present.

The second thing my mom did was simply to share her love. It's imperative that you tell your loved ones regularly that you love them. Just as important is that you actually *show them* you love them, in your actions every day, throughout the day. Hugs, smiles, doing kind things for them, the words and the way we speak, considering their needs and feelings - little things mean a lot.

The third way we can share the gift of presence is through our compassion.

Compassion includes trying to see things through someone else's eyes, trying to understand what they're going through and then doing our best to be kind and to seek to end or share their suffering and to make them happier or more comfortable.

A fourth way we can share the gift of our presence is through listening. We can give so much just by paying attention to a loved one or a friend or a homeless person, and really listening, and showing that we're interested in what they have to say, and showing that what they say is important and respected. Sometimes someone may talk to us but they are only met with a disinterested nod or other small acknowledgment, or we'll make light or fun of what they say, as if it's not important. One person I speak to frequently says, *"Yeah, uh huh, right, of course,"* before I even finish a sentence. I could say,

"And then I saw a 12 foot tall blue chicken reading The Wall Street Journal," and she would say, *"Yeah, uh huh, right, of course."* The gift of listening is a great one, as is thinking to ask the person who is listening to us about how she is doing, what is going on with her and her life.

Another **valuable gift you can give to someone at Christmas and throughout the year is believing in them.** Believing in another person, and showing them you believe in your words and deeds, can make a huge difference. God believes in us - that is why Jesus came to earth to forgive our sins and give us joyful, abundant, eternal life. The great silver wolf believed in Barrington and that made a huge difference. Barrington moved from self-pity to acting with generosity, selfless love, and courage. Studies of people who grew up in dysfunctional homes but who grew up to be happy and successful show that **the one thing they had in common was a significant adult who believed in them.** Do this for your children, your grandchildren and for the adults in your life as well. Support their dreams. Be encouraging - your belief is of tremendous importance to others.

The final gift we can give through our presence is **the gift of believing in God.** This is important because every single person we love will die one day as will we, but we learn at Christmas that we can be with God forever thanks to Jesus Christ. I first heard the story of Barrington Bunny when I was in my early twenties. I've always wanted to share it on Christmas Eve but I never have because I was afraid people would think it was a sad story at a time when they want to be happy. To me, it is a beautiful story about the kind of love Jesus described when he said, no one has greater love than this,

to lay down one's life for one's friends, as he did for us. The large silver wolf, that represents God, comes to Barrington when he is at his lowest point and tells him that bunnies are good because they are warm and can hop and all the animals of the forest are his family. ***And every gift that is given to anyone is given for a reason.*** The news that he has value, purpose, and belongs to a larger family inspires Barrington to change his attitude and his actions.

I told you the story of Barrington Bunny tonight because you need to know it to understand what I am going to tell you now. My mom was more mystical than my father who is a pastor. She liked stories like Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus, in which an angel appears to Joseph three different times in a dream to assure him and provide guidance about the future. I can remember her reading and sharing with me about dreams and Carl Jung and us talking late into the night in Ocean Park, Maine when I was a teenager about life after death.

My mom had a stroke on Thursday, September 17. I visited her on the 18th, the 20th, and was back on Monday, September 21. At this point my mom had suffered a stroke, which had impacted her right side, but the plan was for her to go to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital the next day to begin rehab. Her mind was fine. I had a dream that night when I was at my parent's home in Brookline after visiting Mom at Brigham and Women's Hospital. In the dream I was standing on the hill at the top of the playground behind Runkle School where I went from Kindergarten through 8th grade. Looking down the hill I saw a large silver wolf. I knew it wasn't a coyote, I knew instantly it was the wolf from the story of Barrington Bunny. The wolf looked up the hill at me and I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I knew immediately the wolf wasn't there for me. I turned around walked away a few steps and then looked back over my shoulder and the wolf was much closer to me, just to my right. I bent down and grabbed some woodchips, dirt, whatever my hand could grab and I threw it at the wolf. The wolf turned away for a moment and the dirt and woodchips landed on its big silver back. The wolf turned back and looked at me over its right shoulder and we made eye contact and I knew that moment my mother was going to die. And I woke up, and it was Tuesday morning, September 22.

That dream immediately evoked two feelings in me. Sadness because I loved my mom and her death would leave a great void in all our lives. The second feeling was assurance. The dream was a way of conveying to me not only that my mother would die, but the presence of the great silver wolf to me was comforting because it meant that God

was coming for my mother and that my mom would be in God's presence forever. That very night my mother suffered a fatal heart attack.

I share this with you on Christmas Eve because going through the days leading up to Christmas for myself and others who have lost ones can be difficult. I have found myself tearing up at different points listening to Christmas songs or watching Christmas programs. I know my family will feel my mother's absence keenly tomorrow just as many of you will miss and remember departed loved ones. However, the power and meaning of the Christmas story, of God coming to us in the birth of Jesus Christ, is that we are never truly alone. That God has chosen to be present with us in all our joys and sorrows, in birth and in death, and in every circumstance in between. Many of us will open presents and gifts tomorrow or maybe even tonight. No matter how much excitement or anticipation we may feel about that, it is over in a matter of minutes.

Christmas is about God's gift of Jesus which is a gift that keeps on giving and growing in value the more we seek to live in his presence. While material things are nice, the best gift we can to others is the gift of our presence. We are all created to be a gift to God, to other people, and to the world. Even if you feel like you are not a gift, or that you have little value tonight, the truth is you are and you do. Far more than you realize.

I encourage you this Christmas and in the coming year to live as if life is a gift, as if you are a gift to Jesus, to those around you, both those you know and love and to people you will meet. *"Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift. That's why we call it the present."* There is no greater gift we can receive than the gift of Jesus in our hearts. There is no greater gift we can give to Christ or other people than the gift of ourselves, the gift of our presence.

Blessing: May God bless us with peace in our world, love in our homes, and the Spirit of Christ in our hearts all the days of the year.