

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

December 24, 2016

“Jesus, the Best Gift”

[Opening Video: Rethink Christmas](#)

Call to Worship - *Luke 2:10-11 (ESV)*

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

[Offering Video: Christmas in a Nutshell](#)

A MOMENT FOR MISSION

We often consider Christmas as a season of giving. Much of our energy is spent discerning which gifts we will give to those on our lists.

We go about the task of gift-giving in many ways. Some have made a list, checked it twice and accomplished their objectives by October. Others complete their shopping at the last minute.

For the planner, procrastinator and people in between, gift-giving is a tradition. The season of Christmas in The United Methodist Church begins on sundown on December 24th and lasts until the Epiphany of the Lord on January 6th. In some traditions, gifts are given on each of these days. It is during this time that we are reminded that no gift, no matter how hard we search, will ever compare to what we received when Jesus came to Earth as one of us.

The gift of presence of God with us, the gift of his ministry with the hopeless and the disenfranchised was a bright light shining into the darkest of places. And there are still dark places that need the gift of Jesus' light. We belong to this light, and we can give this light to a world that desperately needs it.

We want you to know tonight that our church gave over \$35,000 to missions last year, locally and globally. We take seriously our responsibility to give light

to the world. As our ushers prepare to receive this evening's love offering, would you please pray with me?

OFFERATORY PRAYER

Great God our Redeemer, we sing your praises. Your glorious love shines in the face of Jesus, born a babe in this dark world. We marvel that he generously humbled himself to bring salvation. How precious is your gift of love! Let the light in our sanctuary and our songs of praise spill through the windows to neighbors dwelling in darkness. May our gifts and offerings reflect the light of Christ, and, as beacons in the night, draw people everywhere closer to you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

SERMON – Luke 2:1-20

What's the best gift you've ever received?

I remember one of my favorite Christmas presents was a green bicycle with training wheels. I think I was 8 when I got it. I was so excited, I actually road it through the living room of my grandparents' farmhouse.

Maybe you remember a special gift that you received. Some jewelry. A special stuffed toy. Or maybe, like me, you don't really remember many specific gifts; you just know you spent time with those you love. You might even have been frustrated from time to time, either from too many gifts (yes, that's a thing), or gifts that really had no meaning at all; they were just trinkets.

Have you ever stopped to wonder, why do we even give gifts? Is it because the wise men gave to Jesus? Is it just tradition? Allow me to give you some good reasons to give: To honor someone. To show them you love them. To give out of the joy in your own life, without expecting something in return.

The value of any gift is not the price tag. It's the effort, the thought behind the gift. Let me illustrate with this story you may have heard before.

“The story goes that some time ago, a man heavily criticized his 3-year-old daughter for wasting a roll of gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became infuriated when the child tried to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree.

Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift to her father the next morning and said, "This is for you, Daddy." He was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction, but his anger flared again when he found the box was empty.

He yelled at her, "Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside it?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh, Daddy, it is not empty. I blew kisses into the box. All for you, Daddy."

The father was crushed. He put his arms around his little girl, and he begged for her forgiveness.

It is told that the man kept that gold box by his bed for years and whenever he was discouraged, he would take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there." <http://www.great-inspirational-quotes.com/a-box-of-kisses.html>

Gifts are meaningful when they are gifts of time, of energy, and of love. A really good gift makes you pause and think.

Tonight is a night to pause and think about the gift we all were given: Jesus Christ, the Savior, the Best Gift.

This Gift is for all of us, for the world. You see, God created us for a relationship. He made the world for us to share with him. The first two humans, Adam and Eve, had everything they needed in the Garden of Eden. Best of all, they had God's presence.

But they chose not to trust God. They chose their own selfish ways. The Bible calls this “sin”. We know this in our own lives. We have all decided our way was better than trusting God. As a result, our world is broken. Everywhere we look, we see anger, hurt, abuse, war, stealing, cheating, and loneliness. For Adam and Eve, the greatest consequence of their sin was being cast out of God’s presence. They were alone. And so were we.

The very nature of sin is that it separates us from the holy, perfect God, much in the same way that cheating, lying, and anger separate us from our own friends and family. Sometimes that is a physical separation, but always, it is an emotional, spiritual separation.

How do you try to fix a broken relationship? With gifts? With bribes? By saying, “I’m sorry”? Those are only temporary fixes, if they work at all. With God Almighty, a greater, more valuable sacrifice has to be made. Someone must pay the price of all our brokenness and sin with his very life.

Our debt to God was too great for us to pay. Brokenness of this magnitude – the payment for every sin the world had ever done and will ever do – could only be paid by God himself. But the good news is that before the foundation of the world, God had a plan to save us.

Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us – stepped down to earth in human form and lived among us. He showed us the way to the Father – the way back to the relationship lost in the Garden of Eden. This is the most amazing gift – given to those who didn’t even know it was theirs. And by dying, alone, on a painful cross, Jesus overcame our debt for all time. For you. For me. For the world.

Then, in the greatest comeback the world has ever known, Jesus rose again on Easter morning, proving that he was God and proving that nothing could ever

stop his love from reaching out to us. No more sacrifice was needed. The only thing needed now is faith: believing that Jesus is Lord and he died for us.

Where does that leave us? With a choice. The forgiveness that Jesus offers is the best gift you will ever receive. Sadly, some people think it is too good to be true. “Jesus died, once, for all? God loves me?” The Bible tells us, that is the absolute, wonderful truth. God loves us enough to die for us. Listen to these words:

[Jesus said,] “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

“...At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-8)

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” Romans (5:1)

This is the gift God gave to us in Jesus Christ – forgiveness and eternal life. Will you receive this gift of love tonight?

I know Christmas is a big deal. We have lots of decorations and presents and food. We light candles at church. It’s a wonderful time of the year, our chance to speak hope, peace, love and joy. But what happens on December 26th? Besides Boxing Day in Canada? What happens next week? Next month? Will the joy and celebration be forgotten? Will we forget whom this season is all about? Will it be just another story?

It’s your choice to worship Christ with your life, your whole life. I’d like to sing a song for you that reflects the choice I have made, not to let Christmas be a

once-a-year event with glitter and parties, but to make it about a lifelong journey with Jesus.

As I sing, you can invite Jesus into your life. You can say, “Jesus, you are in control. You are Lord. Help me live only for you.” And as my favorite radio station says, you will be amazed as Jesus “changes your heart, mind, and attitude.” (Smile.FM)

(“After December Slips Away”)

This evening we celebrate Holy Communion together. It is our way of remembering Christ, to receive his gift of eternal life in a tangible form. There is no magic to it. The elements are simple bread and grape juice. But it means so much more than that.

(Take up the elements.) When Jesus was ready to go to the cross, he had dinner with his best friends, the ones who had journeyed with him for three years. He took a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and passed it to them, saying, “This represents my body, given for you. Every time from now on, when you eat it, I want you to remember me.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God and passed it again to his friends. He said, “This represents my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. This is my promise to you. Every time from now on, when you drink this, I want you to remember me.”

Some people find communion intimidating. They are not sure if they are good enough to accept it. They have never been to church before, never accepted Jesus, they are not sure if they are offending anyone. Let me put you at ease. This is not my table. This is not the church’s table. It is Jesus’ table, and he invites you to partake. If your heart is open to receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus, the gift of Christmas, then you are ready. All are welcome at the Lord’s Supper in the United Methodist Church. If you come from a different

tradition and would prefer not to partake, that's fine. If you simply want to come forward for a prayer, go ahead. But don't let this opportunity pass you by. God is ready to adopt you and bring you into his family. Receiving communion is like sitting down at the table for a meal with the family of God.

Let us pray. God, we ask that you pour out your Holy Spirit upon us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and juice. Make them be for us the Body and Blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his precious blood.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and for ever. Amen.

Blessing:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

John 1:5

Ideas for giving Jesus a birthday present:

- www.umcmision.org/Give-to-Mission/Search-for-Projects/Categories
- www.adventconspiracy.org

Memory verse

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

Reflection questions

1. Why do you give gifts? To whom to you give them?
2. How is Jesus the best gift for us?

3. Is there sin in your life you need to confess? Do you need to tell God, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."?
4. What would be different about your life if you let Jesus be your Savior?
5. After the holidays end, what will you do to continue the Spirit of Christmas? How will you experience hope, peace, love and joy?