

Second Sam. 7: 1-5, 8-12

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.' But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

Matt. 7:7-11

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

+++++

Unwrapping God's Gift

This is an odd interlude, isn't it – a time in-between – this Sunday between Christmas and New Year's. Unlike the past month, there's no consensus this week on what we should be doing or feeling. Thanksgiving had its set expectations: gratitude, stuffed turkey, and fraught family, washed with a slight patina of Americana. Christmas, of course, entails the frenzy of shopping, lights dancing on bare tree limbs, a muffled excitement about new gifts, and Christmas carols sung in a warm church. New Year's Day, just ahead of us, will require earnest resolutions, perhaps some bubbling champagne, and at least a modicum of hope in the face of fresh beginnings.

But this week in between Christmas and New Year's has no set agenda, no societal expectations. It lingers, languishes, lies about the house, limp.

It's an odd time, this Sunday between Christmas and the approaching New Year.

+++++

So I have a suggestion. It will take five or ten minutes, sometime during this in between time. Before the New Year hits its full stride, take five minutes to imagine one last Christmas gift, one I'm guessing you may have been overlooked. Pause to notice the unexpected present, one we didn't realize had been sent, one still unopened....Yet there it is – in the living room, way in the back under the tree; or by your bedside amid the bags and boxes of things opened or to be returned. You may find this last gift down at the bottom of a stocking, still undisturbed, there at the toe or heel.

Take five minutes, in your mind's eye, to unwrap this gift. To hold the package, and look at it carefully. To slowly untie the soft ribbon around it. To carefully slip your forefinger under the wrapping paper, and gently lift off the scotch tape, maybe without even tearing the gift wrap. Take some time to lift the lid from the box, and layer by layer, gently unwrap the tissue paper cushioning your gift, until finally you can see it – and lift it up, *in wonder*:

It's the most amazing gift of Christmas: the gift of God's unconditional love for you. A love that knows no bounds. Do you see it: a light that shines in our deepest darkness, and is *never* overcome. It's the Creator of the entire universe looking upon you – you, as you sit in your pew right now, in just the outfit you're now wearing, with just that jumble of good and bad feelings we all have –and the Creator is absolutely delighted with you. It's the gift of being known and cherished, even with our blemishes and flaws. It's the marvel a healthy parent feels gazing upon her little child, thrilled just to have her alive and breathing.

Have you received it yet – the Christmas gift God gives you of Unending Love?

+++++

Christians have struggled with this gift for centuries: most of us find it impossible to accept. It's as if the gift were just too good for us, too expensive, perhaps too complicated to really understand. There must have been some mistake, we think, and we scramble back to look at the name on the shipping label, assuming the present was intended for another. Or we stare at it for a while, among the tissue papers, then put the lid back on, and scoot the gift back into the corner where we found it, or push it under the bed.

Why?

Why is it so hard to accept that God gives us a gift of unconditional love at Christmas?

+++++

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks to people who found it very hard to ask for any gift from God, fearful that if they do knock on the door, no one will answer. That if they do ask, it will not be given to them. That if they do name their deepest desire, what they receive will undoubtedly disappoint – the difference between the beautiful image we see in a catalog and the deficient product that arrives in the mail.

Many of us can relate. During this past Christmas season, when someone asked you what you wanted for Christmas, did you reply, "Oh, I don't need anything...."? Little children have no trouble naming their desires: they'll come up with a long list for Santa – at least until an adult chastises them as greedy, or they learn, from experience, that all their wishes won't come true. By the time we're adults, we strategically don't dare ask for too many gifts, because once we articulate out loud what we really want, we've raised the stakes. We're afraid get excited when opening the big present, because I when we did that before, we kept finding smaller and smaller boxes enclosed, and the grand finale isn't a small diamond, but a gag gift. We gamely joined in laughing, but we were empty inside. We adults have learned to protect ourselves against disappointment by not even asking for much...

Jesus protests, 'But God's not like that...!' Still, we wonder....

+++++

The Old Testament lesson today describes another common hedge on gifts: we prefer being gift givers rather than receivers. It is easier to give than to receive, because the giver exerts control. So in our reading from Second Samuel this morning, King David, full of his own power and might, declares that he will now build God a great house, the glorious temple God deserves. No longer will God be relegated to the "Ark", the wooden box carried on two long poles in which the Holy of Holies was understood to dwell. Because of King David's military victories, the people no longer need to be nomadic, carrying the Ark with them; now they settle in Jerusalem, and David, the great King, will construct a great temple for his Great God in his great city!

Until God says no. David, says God, "I will build YOU a house." Not a house of timber and stone, but a line of descendants - the house and lineage of David – that will extend for generations from David down to Jesus. "I, God, am the gift-giver," says God. "I will give to you, David. Can you accept my gift?"

Can we accept a gift freely given to us by God, without thinking we must immediately reciprocate? Can you accept a gift that leaves you beholden -- because if you can't, then you can't accept God's love, which is so vast that it can never really be repaid by us.

+++++

Henry Nouwen was a prolific writer, a Catholic priest and professor at Harvard and Yale Divinity Schools before he left to care full-time for severely disabled adults. Nouwen explains in a wonderful, small book, With Open Hands, that we humans rarely come to God with open hands, ready to receive, so we miss out on the gifts God wants to give us.

Instead, our hands may be too full of other things we value and cling to, or our fists are clenched tight in fear or anger. I'm reminded of the children's song on Sesame Street about Ernie, one of the muppets. Ernie loves his little yellow plastic duckie from the

bathtub so much that he can't ever put it down, holding on to it every waking hour for security. But he also wants to learn to play the saxophone, a task that obviously will require two hands, and relinquishing duckie. Ernie, sings one character after another, famous actors and actresses, presidents and friends, "Ya got-ta put down the duck-ie, if you're going to play the saxophone!" To take up something new – something we really want – often means putting down something else we've held very tightly.

What now gives you security, but makes it hard for you to take up something even better, something that can add wonderful music to your life?

+++++

We men and women have so many reasons, built over our lifetimes, that make it hard for us to accept the astounding Gift of Love God gives us on Christmas, in Jesus.

Our hands may be too full, or clenched in fists – so we don't hold our hands open to receive the gift.

We may turn it down feeling we don't deserve it – sending it back to the store for something more in keeping with our diminished sense of ourselves.

Or we might look askance at the gift, muttering to ourselves about the strings likely attached, wary of the obligations we assume will flow from it, dubious of any arrangement that may make us beholden to God.

I wonder what it feels like for God, to have us decline the gift?

+++++

Don't get me wrong. Accepting this gift is no panacea. Life will not be instantly easy. Rain will still fall. Storms will still rage. The storms may even get worse. But we face this with greater calm. Life has more buoyancy. The sages all say this. We can breathe. We can relax.

+++++

I think it's worth the experiment, in this odd in-between time, before the New Year commences in earnest. Will you join me in it? What if we each take five minutes or ten, in silence, by yourself, and pick up the gift you got from God. Look at it closely. Unwrap it, layer by layer, pulling aside the tissue paper, taking in what this gift of unending love might mean for you....Lift it out of the box, hold it up to the light, try it on for size, wrap it around you like a blanket...

+++++

And when you feel far too busy, already juggling too many things, with no room, no room for one more thing, think of Joseph knocking on the door of the stable -- what might happen if you let Mary and Joseph in?

When you feel too awkward, much too ill kempt to ever deserve God's love, remember the shepherds who'd lived outside for weeks, dung caked on the bottom of God's new of great joy and peace for all.

When you feel wary about taking the gift of God's love in your hands, within your heart, within your soul, remember that Mary must have felt that way, too, but when she accepted God's gift, taking God within her, the whole world changed.

+++++

Accepting God's gift of love? Consider, for five minutes this week, unwrapping it, and let me know what you find. I'll do it, also.

During this odd bit to time, lodged between Christmas and New Year's, what better thing do you have to do?