

What Time Is It? Time to Receive

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
December 22, 2013 The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

I'm sure most if not all of you are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan found in the Gospel of Luke. Indeed, if you have attended church even a few times you have probably heard more than one sermon on this popular text. In the story, a man gets beaten up and left for dead. Two holy men come along and see him, but for a number of reasons decide to pass by on the other side and not help. But a Samaritan, of all people – recall that most of Jesus' listeners despised Samaritans – at great personal risk to himself, helps the man, indeed saves his life. Most sermons on this story – most that I have preached – invite the congregation to identify with the Samaritan, to care for others even when it may involve sacrifice on our part. And that is certainly a good message. I suspect that most of us like to think of ourselves as being like the Good Samaritan, people who are willing to lend a hand, to help someone in need, especially during this time of year.

But I recall hearing one sermon that took a different path. This preacher invited the congregation to think of themselves, not as the helper, but as the one in need of help; not as the generous and giving Samaritan, but as the miserable man beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. We like to think of ourselves as givers – more blessed to give than to receive, after all. But how about thinking of ourselves as people who also need to receive...people who might need a little help from outside ourselves?

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. I once read that Charles Dickens' story of Scrooge's transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than Luke's story of the birth in a manger. Whereas Luke tells of God's generous gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. *A Christmas Carol* is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep even the worst of us can become generous, giving people. As one pastor writes, "We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate." And heaven knows that is not all bad. We need all the giving people we can get, especially in these rather selfish and mean-spirited times, when a number of voices tell us to defend what we have from all those who are trying to take it away from us.

Trouble is, the biblical account of the first Christmas takes us in a completely opposite direction, for in that timeless story we are portrayed, not as the givers we wish we were, but as the receivers we are. Says one pastor, "Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we – with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities – had little to do with God's work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins and stars in the sky to get it done. We didn't think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from God..." As Titus tells us, "For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all."

Sounds good...But, again, somehow it just goes against the grain. When we mess our lives up, hurt ourselves and or others, when we lose our way, I'm guessing that most of us don't want to hear, "Well, you really screwed things up this time. There is no way you are going to get yourself out of this." No, the preferred mantra is, "Don't worry. You have the solution to your problems within you. You have all you need. Deep down, you have the resources to handle anything that happens in your life." All we need to do is channel our inner Dr. Phil. We have within us the solution to whatever it is that ails us. That is the popular gospel word I hear over and over again, especially in this part of the world. But if that is true, then why do we need Christmas? Why pay any attention to the birth in the manger, why even bother to tell the story?

I am reminded of a classic "Peanuts" cartoon. Linus is in a reflective mood as he finishes a sandwich. Looking down at his hands he says, "Hands are fascinating things. I like my hands. I think I have nice hands. My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands which may someday accomplish great things. These are hands which may someday do marvelous works. They may build mighty bridges or heal the sick or hit home runs or write soul-stirring novels. THESE ARE HANDS WHICH MAY SOMEDAY CHANGE THE COURSE OF HUMAN DESTINY!"

Lucy, who has been listening to all this, walks over, looks down at his hands and says, "They've got jelly on them," then walks away.

Now, I'm not sure I want to compare God to Lucy, and yet...is the birth of Jesus God's way of saying to us, "I think you all could use a little help, a new direction, a light for your way, indeed a whole new life. I love your hands, but they have a little jelly on them. What do you say we wash them clean – baptism? – and start again? And I will even send you one to show you the way. I want to free you, to jar you loose from the modern tempos and excesses that have led you into a dark winter of drifting and call you back toward the beauties and mysteries and truths for which you were made. And all I ask is that you receive the gift." But it's so much easier said than done...this receiving thing.

But there is at least one other problem with this idea of being receivers. I don't know if you are familiar with the television show, "Big Bang Theory," but one of the leading characters, Sheldon, hates Christmas. He is a physicist and everything in his life is carefully calculated, planned, cause and effect. Actually it's not so much Christmas he hates as the gift giving...rather the gift receiving. For every gift he receives means he is now obligated to respond – to reciprocate with a gift of his own. Receiving leads to giving which leads to more receiving – a vicious cycle he would just as soon not be a part of. As he sees it, to receive a gift means that we must live every day in the red, everyday needing to respond, to reciprocate.

I think we should blame Luke for this sorry state of affairs because that birth in the manger means that we are receivers long before we are givers, and, again, it can be so tough to be on the receiving end of love – God's or anyone else's. Says one college chaplain, "Working with students at a university, I've decided that this truth is a major reason why so many children come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made men and women, standing on our own two feet, striding bravely into a new world of our own creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at age 21 and admit, 'My God, I look just like my old man.'" In marriage too, I wonder if sometimes our struggles and tensions develop from our inability simply to receive from another...no strings attached.

And it might even impact our faith. As John Wesley once said, "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace." For then I am reminded that my life is not my possession to do with as I wish. No, my life is a gift, pure and simple, undeserved and unasked for...a free ticket to an incredible banquet. I didn't do anything to earn this. But if that is true, what kind of response to you suppose God might require? Better yet, if all this is a gift to be received, and I choose to receive it with thanksgiving, how might I be changed? What if I choose to respond in ways that surprise even me? Maybe that is why Shelton is so afraid of Christmas. Receiving can mean unexpected change, a totally new direction we never saw coming.

A Fred Craddock story: "There was a certain church in which the young people, as Christmas approached, wanted somebody in the church to play Santa Claus for their annual Christmas party for disadvantaged kids. They went to one man who was a leader in the church, a banker, very close with his money, but very faithful to the church. They went to him and said, 'Will you be the Santa Claus at our Christmas party?'

"And he said, 'I guess so.' It was a moment of weakness. They didn't ask him because he was generous or had the qualities of Santa Claus. They asked him because of his shape. He looked like he would be a good Santa, so they asked him, and he said, 'Sure.'

But as the time for the party approached, he got nervous. He growled about it at supper every night. He said to his wife, 'I can't do this. I can't be Santa Claus.' 'Sure you can, dear,' she said, 'just put on that silly suit and pretend. It's no big deal.'

The night arrived for the party. He was so nervous he could hardly button the suit. 'God help me to be a good Santa Claus,' his wife heard him mumble. 'You are taking all the fun out of it,' she said, 'just relax.'

"He went to the church, played Santa, and by the end of the party, he had committed much of his bank account to helping those poor kids. 'How could you do that?' his perplexed wife asked. 'Nobody expected you actually to *be* Santa Claus, for God's sake!'" When you receive the gift of blessing, the promise of Christmas, the hope and power of Jesus, when you let all of that into your heart, you just never know what might happen. Who knew Christmas could be so risky?

Dare to receive the gift. As the great theologian Paul Tillich once preached, "Simply accept the fact that you are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." It just might be that this is the greatest gift of Christmas.