

The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Christmas Eve, 2011
The Church of St. Michael the Archangel
The Reverend Sally Hubbell

I want to talk a little bit about Christmas gifts. During the month of December, it can be hard to separate the anticipation of Christmas from this subject of gifts. For children, of course, there is a lot of thought put into what Christmas gifts they hope to receive, and for adults that shifts to making sure we have the gifts that we want to give, or feel we should give others. Regardless of what age we may be, often our preparation for the holiday concerns the rituals we have around giving and receiving Christmas gifts. This is true even for those of us who officially keep track of this time of year NOT by the number of shopping days remaining before December 25, but by observing the season of the Church year we know as Advent. Advent preparation is of course meant to be something very different from counting down shopping days, but bear in mind the outcome is the same -- both end in gifts.

A few weeks ago I was talking with a friend of mine, and she told me a story about a Christmas when she was about 22 or 23 years old that was something of a watershed in her becoming an adult and also I believe in her faith and understanding of God. She had come home from college feeling a deep, deep desire to only give gifts that Christmas that were truly of herself -- gifts that were more than heartfelt, but actually of her heart. And so, on Christmas morning, instead of there being anything from her underneath the tree, she joyously told her family that their gift this year would be HER. Her present to them was to be her whole and genuine presence in their lives. Apparently this didn't go over so well with her mother, who considered her to be something of a spoiler. Although my friend had warned her family beforehand that she herself didn't want any material gifts that year, her mother nonetheless had gotten her a desk chair as a Christmas gift. My friend said "I was so disappointed to be getting this chair for Christmas, when what I really wanted was my mother!"

I'm very sympathetic with my friend's desire to get away from the focus on material gifts at Christmas, and instead bring the gift giving ritual of her family to a new and deeper level of giving. But at the same time I can see how her mother might have felt thrown off kilter. I think there are certainly times when we could all expand our idea of just what constitutes a gift.

For instance, this service tonight is a gift. The opportunity to sit down and simply breathe in the quiet beauty of the church in candle light in the midst of this season which can be so very busy is a gift. The lovely music we can all sing because it's familiar and perhaps even our favorite music of year has the power to make even people who seldom come to church feel like they belong here and are exactly where they need to be. It's hard not to feel at home with such beautiful and familiar music calling to us. So thank you Trent, and thank you Regina (our flutist). And thank you, choir members, for coming out on this cold winter night to lead us in song.

And our church is so beautiful. Last Sunday the Altar Guild coordinated the "greening of the church," when people stay late on the last Sunday of Advent to hang all of this lovely and fragrant greenery that marks Christmastide in such a beautiful way. Imagine Christmas without "boughs of holly" and the evergreen to remind of life enduring in the dead of winter! Thank you, Altar Guild (Aprel Mitchell) and all of you who hung this Greenery last week! It is a wonderful gift to us all.

In every church service, there are many, many parts to be played -- there are acolytes who light the candles which set our solemn mood and help set aside this place as sacred. And then there are greeters to welcome us, ushers who organize things from out there and keep things running smoothly from the back of the church, and chalice ministers who bring us communion in more ways than one. There are readers who help us focus on our scripture, and the Intercessor who leads us in prayer. And for all of these ministries, there are coordinators behind the scene organizing who will be doing what when. And of course, I am thankful for my friend Edwina, who has come out of retirement to be our deacon tonight. All of these many people are giving us a gift this evening.

In the weeks leading up to our rector's retirement, and especially in the weeks since then, I've been getting an in depth education in what a complex operation running this church is. Outside of church services, there is snow to shovel, the parking lot to plow, buildings to unlock and heat to turn on. Buildings to lock up and heat to turn off! A never ending schedule of cleaning, maintenance, repairs. There are bulletins to compose, proof-read and print. Newsletters to compose, proof-read and print, and then assembly, stapling and distribution. And behind all of this operation is a budget which involves most all of us in one way or another, some more than others when it come to actually keeping track of the money it takes to run things. I could go on.

What I want to convey is the deep sense of gratitude I feel for the life of this church and the gifts that are given in abundance by the people who keep it all going. Everyone here right now, whether you're sitting in a pew for the first time at St. Mike's as well as those who have been working behind the scenes for years, is at this moment a part of the whole functioning of this church, and you are enabling us all to be the people we are called by God to be -- you are all part of the greatest gift, which is the Body of Christ among us and in our midst. You see, when we gather as Church, we both receive the Body of Christ and we ARE the Body of Christ. This is the gift of Jesus' birth -- the gift of God entering into our world and sharing his life with us. Thank you all for sharing in our communion with each other and with God on this most holy of nights.

At the four o'clock service which took place a few hours ago here at St. Michael's, there was another gift that was given by the children of this parish, and that was the Christmas pageant. It's hard to sum up what all of those gifts are: the sweet singing, the cute costumes and the heartfelt performances of the children. It doesn't mater if lines get mixed up, or there are untimely entrances, or if voices are projected too softly or too loudly. I don't think it's possible to really mess up a Christmas pageant. I can understand preferring the peace and solemnity of this eight o'clock services over what can feel a bit like mayhem when this sanctuary is packed with all of the children of the pageant and their families, but it certainly is cute!

I want to share with you a portion of the story they acted out for us. There were shepherds, sheep, stars, innkeepers, angels and kings, all of whom were decked out in adorable costumes and sang beautiful songs. Of course there was a donkey, in this case made of cardboard and wheeled out by Joseph who accompanied Mary. And then a doll baby Jesus appeared in little wooden manger. As is often the case in pageants, there were also narrators who told the story intermittently as the children acted it out. What I want you to hear is the concluding the narration -- the "sum up" if you will:

"Nearly two thousand years ago in an obscure village, a child was born to a peasant woman. He grew up in another village where He worked as a carpenter until he was thirty. Then for three years He became an itinerate preacher.

“This man never went to college or seminary. He never wrote a book. He never held a public office. He never had a family nor owned a home. He never put His foot inside a big city nor traveled even 200 miles from His birthplace. And though he never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness, throngs of people followed Him. He had no credentials but Himself.

“While He was still young, the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His followers ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was sentenced to death on a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth--the simple coat He had worn. His body was laid in a borrowed grave provided by a compassionate friend.

“But three days later this Man arose from the dead--living proof that He was, as He had claimed, the Saviour whom God had sent, the Incarnate Son of God.

“Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the central figure of the human race. On our calendars His birth divides history in two eras. One day of every week is set aside in remembrance of Him. And our two most important holidays celebrate His birth and resurrection. On church steeples around the world His cross has become the symbol of victory over sin and death.

“This one Man’s life has furnished the theme for more songs, books, poems and paintings than any other person or event in history. Thousands of colleges, hospitals, orphanages and other institutions have been founded in honor of this One who gave His life for us.

“All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the governments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned have not affected the course of history as much as this One Solitary Life.”

That’s how our Christmas pageant ended here at St. Michael’s a few hours ago.

What I intend to be my gift to you, is to help you see how your presence here this evening is a part of this whole miraculous story of Jesus’ birth and this whole history of the salvation of the world since his birth, as it’s unfolding even now. Even if this is your one and only time at this church or any church, you are part of this whole that makes us *the Church* this evening.

I want you all to understand that your lives are part of the wondrous gift we celebrate this holiday. You see, the gift of this season, the true gift of Jesus’ birth in that stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago is the same gift that our little Mary and Joseph and Shepherds and Stars acted out this evening, and that is communion. The gift is communion both with God and with each other. It is communion in every sense that word can mean. And the beauty of communion is it makes us simultaneous givers and receivers -- we can’t give it without receiving it, and we can’t receive it without giving it. Receiving God in our midst, as we do at Christmas, means that we’re all in this together. We receive Christ’s body together, and we become the Body of Christ together.

Let yourselves, this Christmas, both receive and be that gift. This is the blessing that has come to us with the birth of Jesus. Amen