

This Precious Gift – November 15, 2009 – 24th Sunday After Pentecost – Hebrews 10: 11-25

We're coming onto Christmas; and Thanksgiving is just eleven days away. So it is not too early to invest some time and thought on gifts and giving - **on what it means to be thankful**, and for what, **and for whom** are we thankful... To remember and reflect upon special gifts given and gifts received: what acts of giving caused us to be surprised by God's grace and what moments of receiving perhaps touched and transformed our lives.

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When I was a young grade school boy, I was like most boys of that time. The gifts that I most desired and that I most often requested at Christmas time were trucks or a football or a baseball bat or bags of plastic soldiers. And I was, of course, happy if any of these wishes and requests came true.

But the gift that always meant the most to me was a gift that almost always arrived in the mail a few days after Christmas Day. It was wrapped in worn brown paper, and it was tied with twine. The top right side of the package was covered with stamps - strange looking stamps, with pictures of people I had never seen before.

The moment that I saw the package - and the twine and the strange looking stamps - I knew that the package was from Uncle Russell and Aunt Polly, my grandmother Jenkins' sister, and her husband, who served as missionaries overseas.

The package may be from Peru or Ecuador or what was then Burma or some place in Africa. The gifts were small and strange to me - brightly colored book marks from Africa; hand made mittens from Peru; a puzzle with wooden pieces from China...

No football... no pack of plastic soldiers... nothing that I had seen on TV... **Nothing, except whole new worlds being opened to me...**

These were precious gifts to me, more valuable – and more valued – than anything that modern advertising could ever create or that money could buy. I would store these gifts from Aunt Polly and Uncle Russell in a special place, for they were true treasures to me...

These little packages always caused me to wonder – and to imagine – how other people - how other children outside my little world in Weymouth, Massachusetts lived and how they felt.

This was the gift that each year my aunt and uncle gave to me - an invitation to think and to imagine, even as a young boy, beyond my immediate wants and needs. These little gifts in worn brown paper wrapped in twine shaped and directed and transformed my life. These gifts were acts of love and grace. And for these gifts, wrapped in brown paper and twine, I am eternally thankful.

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The passage that we have heard this morning speaks to us in a clear and serious tone about the gifts that God has given each of us. Paul writes, "Jesus Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for our sins."

This is God's gift to us. Through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God's Beloved, we are neither burdened nor twisted nor condemned by our sins - or by our sinfulness.

Paul continues, “By a single offering, Jesus has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

This, too, is God’s gift to us. We who have been sanctified - set apart; or, if you will, we who have been saved by our willing faithful encounter with the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus - we have been invited to grow in grace and be perfected in love.

Let us prayerfully reflect upon this...

Through the single act of Christ dying for us - and through the triumphant consequent act of God raising Christ from the dead - we have been rescued from every dangerous detour and dead end that our sinfulness has brought us. We who have been lost, terribly lost... we who have made more than our share of bad decisions, simply because we have been lost, simply because in our sinfulness, we have lost our way... **we have been found!** We have regained our senses. We have remembered who we are – and whose we are...

And we who have been restored to this new life have been invited by God our Creator to grow into this life and to increase our capacity to love!

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To be perfected in love...

“To give and not count the cost”... “To labor and not seek reward, except for the reward of serving you, O God.” These words are part of a prayer once offered by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, a group of Christians dedicated to learning and to mission.

“To truly love God so that we may fully serve God, for to serve God is perfect freedom”... These words are part of a prayer once offered by Augustine, the great Christian leader of the fifth century.

And both of these prayers offer us a glimpse of **the simple, unadorned joy** that comes with loving others, of being of help and service to others - of stepping away even for a moment from thinking solely about ourselves... of ceasing the ongoing wrestling match that we have with the ongoing crises in our own lives... of letting go of all the tangled knots in our lives... of letting God take – and take care - of all of that... **so that we may turn to others...**

We all know, I am certain, how that feels: that joy that comes when we forget ourselves because we are invested in and involved with others...

That is a precious part of this precious gift that God has given us. We are not merely rescued from our sin. We are empowered and equipped to love - to be led beyond our little world; to see beyond the present moment to other worlds, other people, other possibilities.

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In this passage that we have heard this morning, Paul describes both our new state of being – we call this being born again - and how we have received this new life.

Paul writes that it is through the blood of Jesus – though Jesus’ willing, selfless sacrifice of his life, in full and complete obedience to God the Father’s will – that our hearts and our conscience have been sprinkled

clean - that we have been given the precious gift of a new life in Christ... we call this baptism...and as a consequence of this baptism, we are “marked as Christ’s own... forever.”

Through this precious gift that God has given us - the gift of his Son Christ Jesus - through that mystery of faith... “Christ has died... Christ is risen... Christ will come again”... we have been saved from lives of waywardness, of purposelessness, of selfishness, and of self-destructive behavior...

And as part of this gift, we have been set apart...

We have been given yet another precious gift, **the gift of faith**... and from that gift of faith, we have been given still yet another precious gift, the **gift of hope**...

Paul writes, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope – without wavering – without giving up- for God who has promised is faithful.”

And from our rescued and redeemed state, equipped with the gifts of faith and hope, what are we to do? We are to love others. And we are to encourage others to love. We are to do acts of kindness, compassion, mercy, encouragement, and justice. And we are to encourage others to do the same. We are to fellowship with each other, be good company with each other, share our lives with others. And we are to encourage others to do likewise.

In other words, we are to be builders of God’s in-breaking Kingdom, one rescued, saved, transformed person at a time. In other words, we are to share with others all of the precious gifts that God has given us: the good news of a new life in Christ - and the precious gifts of faith, hope, and love.

In other words, as Francis of Assisi, was known to say, “we are to preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.”

In other words, as Jesus said to his disciples – and to us – we are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – and teaching people to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

In other words, we are to offer ourselves... In other words, we are to be Christ to others.

In other words, we are to be those instruments of peace and grace and wonder to others in much the same way as those little gifts wrapped in worn paper were once to me – so that those whom we meet in our lives may be moved from merely acting upon what they want and want they think they need – to reflecting on how they too can serve... so that, in time, each of us - **all of us** - may become precious gifts to each other. **Amen.**