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“Centered in God’s Love”

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Second Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

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Ephesians 1:3–12; John 1:1–5, 9–14, 16; 3:16–17

Even though the New Year has come, we remain in the season of Christmas. The eleventh day of Christmas to be exact. Kathy, do we have eleven pipers piping somewhere?

If Christmas is remembered by us as anything at all, it is remembered as the season of gifts. Children’s eyes sparkle with wonder as they gaze at a tree encircled with presents and a stocking stuffed with goodies. The rush of adults to find and wrap and deliver the perfect gift. The iconic image of Santa and sleigh and reindeer delivering precious cargo pervades our culture. Christmas is a season of gifts.

Sometimes ministers and other self-appointed protectors of the faith can turn into Grinches who decry the crass commercialization and consumption of the season. We get ourselves all worked up trying to redeem the holiday from its grasping greediness. We attempt to stake an exclusive claim on the meaning and use of Christmas.

A more subtle way we do this is by suggesting a shift in focus from receiving to giving: giving to the needy, to the poor, or to the hungry. Certainly that is a good thing to do. Many around us live in desperate conditions that cry out for our attention. We have been blessed and we are called to bless others. And so a reminder is intoned that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

But truth be told, don't the hungry and homeless have needs that exist 365 days a year, and not merely at Christmas? Why don't these religious Grinches get worked up in February or July?

And the Gospel of John does not side with the religious Grinches at all. It will have nothing to do with such suggestions to refocus our attention on giving rather than receiving. The Good News of this season, according to the Gospel of John, is not that we can give or that we do give, but precisely that we, every one of us, that *we are receivers*. The drama of the prophets' hope and the centuries-long wait by God's people which finally culminates in the birth of Jesus—this Christmas drama is not about what human beings have been able to accomplish or bring about or do. No, the drama of Christmas is what God has done, what God has given, what only God can and did do.

The excessive giving, which some might say “afflicts” this season, is derived from the very nature and character of God's gracious and overwhelming gift of Jesus Christ.

The truth of Christmas is that we are receivers and not givers. If we have anything to give, it is because of what we have received in God's giving to us. We are like the child who comes offering a present to her mother: it is a gift to be sure, but whose resources purchased the gift?

It is a difficult lesson for us to learn. I think it is far more difficult for us to be in the position of receiving, of being needy recipients, than being givers. When you are a giver, you are in control, you call the shots, you make decisions about who gets what and why.

When you are the receiver, you are at someone else's mercy. You are no longer in control. As they say, “beggars can't be choosy.” No wonder we don't like being receivers.

I see it all the time. A person is hurting: grief or anxiety or guilt is strangling the life out of him or her. Someone asks, “How are you doing?” and the response is “Oh, great! Really I'm fine.” Yet inside they are desperate for an embrace, a

listening ear, a kind word. One of the greatest challenges in helping others is their willingness to seek help and accept it.

We are receivers of the gift of life, and ultimately we have such little control over it. Lately, many of us have been reminded of that truth, and when we embrace it, life in its preciousness becomes so much sweeter. Black lives matter, children's lives matter, police lives matter.

Thomas Merton wrote: "The things I thought were so important—because of the effort I put into them—have turned out to be of small value. And the things I never thought about, the things I was never able either to measure or to expect, were the things that mattered" (*The Sign of Jonas*, p. 346). When we understand we are receivers, then the things that matter begin to sort themselves out.

The story of this season is that we really are receivers and not givers. God acts to intervene on our behalf and on behalf of the world. God through Jesus is light in the darkness, hope to the despairing, life to the dying, salvation to the sinful, family to the orphaned. Emmanuel, God with us, in all of life, for all of us. The universal, all-embracing message of the Christmas Gospel is: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..."

God's love is the motivation for all the gift-giving. All the remarkable blessings that this season points to are centered in God's love.

Andrew Greeley in his book *Confessions of a Parish Priest* tells a story about the King of Kerry who ruled in the west of Ireland many years ago. His name was Fergus McDermott O'Donnell, and he was good and wise and brave, and he ruled his people justly. His time on earth and his kingdom was blessed with peace and prosperity. At last he grew old, his health failed, and he was about to die. He asked to be taken outdoors to a meadow where he said his tearful goodbye to his wife and children and grandchildren, and to his little great-granddaughter, a blonde-haired toddler of 3. And as he gave up his spirit, Fergus grabbed a clump of rich Kerry turf.

The remainder of the story is set at the pearly gates where Simon Peter mans the entrance when King Fergus seeks entry.

Fergus attempts to enter heaven where he is certainly welcomed; however, he wants to bring in his clump of Kerry turf. He is told repeatedly that the only way to enter heaven is with empty hands. King Fergus resists. And the Lord God makes many attempts to entice Fergus into the kingdom. God disguises himself as an Irish countryman with a grey suit that hasn't been cleaned or pressed for forty years, smoking a big Havana cigar—he offers Fergus the promise of cosmic Jamison and Guinness if he only drops the turf in his hand. But Fergus will not relent. God then disguises himself as a little blonde three year old who needs a grown-up to escort her to a party in the heavenly city. Fergus nearly capitulates but then realizes the ruse. “I'll not be taken in by your tricks! I know who you are. You're not a wee lass; you're the Lord God in disguise!” And again Fergus resists.

King Fergus finally relents and enters the heavenly city without his Kerry turf. And embedded in this story are these remarkable words that Andrew Greeley writes: “The Lord is devious and will stop at nothing to get us into the heavenly city.” That is the proper tone and intent of the incarnation: God's remarkable love.

Christmas is not only a season of gifts; it is also the story of a birth. The Word became flesh, we are told. And when we think about birth in this Christmas season, we assume it is about the birth of Jesus. Again the Gospel of John pulls us up short. The story told in its pages does not include Nativity scenes and shepherds and angels and Wise Men. It does not focus on the birth of Jesus at all.

You see, the Gospel of John pushes us to the story of birth which is not ancient history. Instead it is personally and intimately relevant to each of us today. It has to do with our birth. “To as many as received him did he give the power to become children of God.” The Gospel of John wants us to remember the purpose, the goal, the fulfillment of the “Word become flesh.” The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is connected with our own destiny as children of God.

Birth is life. Life is a gift. From God have we received, grace upon grace, gift upon gift, new life upon new life.

To embrace the Word made flesh, the one born in Bethlehem, is to be born of God. To be a receiver of God's gift is to become a child of God. To be numbered in God's family is to be given the power to be transformed into the image and likeness of the One who has fathered us.

The Apostle Paul claims that this was God's plan from the very beginning. "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will." In Galatians Paul put it this way: "If you are adopted as God's children, you are a part of God's family. And if you are children of God then you are heirs. And as heirs, you have responsibilities and a manner of life to attend." (paraphrase of Galatians 4:1–11)

To be adopted, to have an inheritance as rich as the one described in Paul's writings demands of us response and responsibility. What is the nature of responsibility we bear as God's children?

I believe William Temple had it right when he wrote many years ago:

It was into the real world that Christ came, into the city where there was no room for him, and into a country where Herod, the murderer of innocents, was king. [Christ] comes to us, not to shield us from the harshness of the world but to give us the courage and strength to bear it; not to snatch us away by some miracle from the conflict of life, but to give us peace—his peace—by which we may be calmly steadfast while the conflict rages, and be able to bring to the torn world the healing that is peace.

Faith does not protect us; instead it plunges us into the world of hurt and evil to bring healing.

In order to be instruments of peace in this world, we must first of all be receivers. To offer anything to this world we need to receive what God has given: forgiveness and new life and hope and encouragement.

The world remains broken. Yet even in the face of senseless violence and withering warfare, some put themselves between that violence and the innocent; some protect those in their charge the best they can; some provide calm in the midst of chaos; some save lives.

That is what children of God are called to do. For most of us it will never be very dramatic. Yet it may be just as important. Feeding the hungry, whether it is at Christmas or in July. Advocating for improved mental health care and treatment options for families. Tutoring at-risk children. Engaging discussions among ourselves and with our elected officials for common sense gun laws and the protection of our educational institutions. Making a visit to someone sick at home.

Every act of a child of God has the potential for reflecting the love of God in Christ. We must take heart in the message of the Gospel of John: “The Light shines in darkness, and the darkness will never extinguish it.”

This is a season of gifts and the celebration of a birth. No matter how we protest or how we resist, we are the receivers.

And it is not only the birth of Jesus we celebrate; it’s our own birth as the children of God: children who bear responsibility in our world as instruments of peace and wholeness. And all is centered in God’s love. Amen.