

Have you ever received a gift you didn't expect? It came out of the blue – you had no expectations -- the gift was a complete surprise – and you'll never forget it.

That happened to me, somewhere between four and five years of age. It was Christmas time; the tree was laden with presents. I was very anxious for Christmas morning. It never entered my mind that my older brother would ever give me a gift, so when he told me his gift for me was under the tree I went looking for it. I couldn't find it. I saw this piece of cardboard, cut in the shape of a Christmas tree, colored green. In my young eyes all it looked like was a piece of cardboard. I could not see any gift there and I thought my brother was just playing a trick on me.

So, I forgot about it. I didn't open it. Now, let's remember, when we were that age, we rarely turned away from a gift. I didn't think twice about it until after all the gifts had been opened and my parents asked, "Aren't you going to open your present from Mark?"

I must have looked pretty funny but I went over to this piece of cardboard and picked it up. There was a little bit of weight to it. I turned it over and over and finally I realized it was two pieces of cardboard glued together. Everybody in the family kept urging me to open it. Finally, I began to pull apart those two pieces of cardboard and found this wonderful gift hidden in the middle.

It was a small, yellow plastic contraption, called a boomerang gun, which you shot low to the ground and this large metal disk would spin backwards after it skidded across the floor at lightning speed and then return itself to you. I played with it all day. One Christmas gift I'll never forget.

God gave us the gift of his Son, Jesus, as a baby, at Christmas. Sometimes Jesus seems hidden in our lives. Other times we recognize our Savior as the greatest gift God could give us because Jesus, in human form, allows us to know God intimately – to know his love – to know his forgiveness – to know his presence. Jesus Christ is a gift to receive; some Christians call the greatest gift!

Today is Deacon Sunday and they have prepared a small card for you to think about serving your time and talents somewhere in this church. These cards can be returned to ushers in the offering plate. The Deacons will go through them and contact you. The Deacons are one of a group of many servants in this church. They are responsible for Communion Preparation and Serving, for Ushering, Coffee Fellowship, the Medical Team, Setting up the Sanctuary for worship, driving the Owl Express for those who have difficulty getting from their cars in the parking lot to the church. So today's scripture and sermon is about serving; it's about giving; it's about what we do as Christians to do Christ's work.

**LET'S US READ OUR SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY ABOUT GIVING –**

The Apostle is thanking the Corinthian church for their giving and encouraging them to continue in their gifts. God has gifted each of us – that’s understood. We know this intuitively. We rightfully claim that our children all have special gifts. And equally we claim that each person in church has special gifts. Everyone in this world has something to offer. No two people are alike in their gifts. How beautiful is the world to know that each of us has something to offer, something to give, something to gift back to God, for all that God has provided to us in our lives.

The Apostle Paul starts with, most likely, a well-known proverb of his day; “if you give sparingly, you will reap sparingly; and if you give generously you will also reap generously.”

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus said, “Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus said these words, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

That’s God’s gift to us. Jesus Christ, his son, who came so that we might have new life through his grace and mercy.

Pretty awesome gift! What are we going to do with it? How do we unfold, unwrap this precious gift from God? How do we open it and take it in; in to the very core of our being? Rev. Eric Thomas in her sermon at my installation last Sunday prayed these words, “God, break open your Word and break open our lives so that your Word enters us and changes us.”

Giving is personal. We carefully choose the gifts we give to others. We take time to pick out cards that say just the right message; gifts that project just the degree of love and care we want to convey.

I think it’s difficult at best to really believe that when we give we’ll be given more. The paradoxes in the Bible baffle us; the first will be last and the last will be first; Love your enemies; Do good to those who hate you; Pray for those who persecute you. Our lives can be led by giving what our heart has decided to give.”

**What does your heart want to give?** And to God? That’s personal! That’s between you and God! That’s about your relationship with God - where you gift or give your God-given gifts back to God. And if we all did that, what a beautiful world we would have.

Yet, that is not what happens. We protect ourselves. We shield our gifts and keep them to ourselves. Sometimes we are afraid of giving up too much of ourselves. **We look at giving as a personal sacrifice: this is what I’m giving up!**

I believe listening to your heart is about your life – how your life is lived – how it speaks to the world.

Parker Palmer, author of, “Let Your Life Speak,” relates his own story about pursuing all the other avenues of a successful life but not following his heart. In his own words, “I had simply found a noble way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart.”

The Apostle is trying to help us listen to our heart – “Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give.” 2 Cor. 9:7. Listening to our heart is important – for when we listen to our heart, we are listening for God’s message to us – we are hearing the truths about us that we, individually embody, and the values that we, individually represent.

Listening is indeed important – Each of us listens to our life and what it is saying to us – Do this! Do that! Don’t do this! Don’t do that! Go here! Go there! Say this! Say that! Befriend this person! Befriend that person! Give myself to him/her. Don’t give them another ounce of my life. I’ll give God this, but not that! Sound familiar to us, compromises!

That’s what happens! I’ll give a littler here; a little there, and on and on we make these compromises, putting self before God and limiting our gifts. I don’t believe this is living the truth of our lives that God has given us to live. If we live

as someone less than our God-gifted being, then we are not being true to God and God's plan for us.

We are taught since childhood to listen to teachers and others in life who tell us what to do. We are rarely told to listen to ourselves. Listen for the truths to your life. Parker Palmer wrote, "We listen for guidance everywhere except from within." I believe when we listen for what's inside, we are listening to God.

What we hope to do in church and what I believe the Apostle is getting at, is that, when we **listen to our heart**, we are honoring our lives in a way that is truthful to who we are as a person; as God's daughters and sons. It's not a voice out there calling you to be something you're not. It's a voice within you, calling you to be the person you were born to be, to fulfill the original gift of selfhood given to you by God.

Our true vocation comes from listening to ourselves and being truthful to ourselves and to whom God wants us to be. Vocation may not seem to be the appropriate word here, but it comes from the Latin for "to call" or "voice." Palmer states, "Vocation does not mean a goal that we pursue. It means a calling that we hear."

We can't honestly give ourselves, gifting the gift of God, until we receive Jesus Christ in our hearts, then, and only then, can we gift ourselves as whom God has called us to be! It is both, the acceptance of Christ as your Lord and Savior

**AND** the acceptance of the treasure of your true self that you have always possessed.

Every time you give; every time you serve, you are thanking God. The Apostle has a wonderful way of stating this truth, “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (2 Cor. 9:12). God feels the joy you feel when you serve others. And that’s giving God thanks for your life. That’s gifting the gift of God!

You may think you have lived the majority of your life and it’s a little late to talk about vocation, except that in God’s world, it is never too late to give; it’s never too late to serve. We give because we care. Caring is the privilege of every person and is at the heart of being human. So many in this church serve! So many in this church care. Today we talked about our Deacons and the varied services they bring to us each week.

I want to close with this note; the greatest gift you can give is to care for someone, especially when they are dying. Henri Nouwen writes, “To care for others as they become weaker and closer to death is to allow them to fulfill their deepest vocation, that of becoming ever-more fully what they already are: daughters and sons of God. It is to help them to claim, especially in their dying hours, their divine childhood...” (*The Greatest Gift*, pg. 58) Amen.