

*Asking for Good Gifts*

Lesson: Matt 7:1-11

A Communion Meditation

I'm not good at finding gifts, never have been - really. It takes a listening ear when someone says, "I'd like to have that sometime," and some imagination to see a gift when you notice something novel. I can do those things sometimes, but I don't have a good memory. You have to remember the gift to go find it. I hear something, see something, but I don't store it away.

Mary Lynn was one of the best gift givers I ever knew. We heard the song you heard this morning, "Simple Gifts," at her memorial service in October. Mary and her husband were landlords and proxy grandparents to us when we started marriage and graduate school at Duke. She would show up with some little gift-wrap at an occasion like the birth of our daughter, or our birthdays or an anniversary – or for no reason at all. The gift always has some surprise to it, and it just "fit" us or the occasion. They were something we didn't expect, and the value she put into it was the thought more than cost.

Mary was thoughtful, and she had the gift of giving good gifts. She thought about more than what we might like and what we might want. She had no need to ask us what we might want. She would find something we wanted, even if we didn't know it.

The lesson says, "Ask, seek, knock, ...and you will receive, find, open." Here's one part of the instructions to followers that we can follow. We have hunting and gathering in our DNA. They are old, native skills. We search and ask without thinking, without realizing, and sometimes we ask when we don't know what to ask or ask for the wrong things. We humans are driven by desires in our hunting. Deep down, we humans hunt are programmed in our spiritual DNA to look for love behind the gifts. Mary's gifts will always be remembered, because they said, "I love you."

The message about love in the gift can be pretty ambiguous, and sometimes there is a difference in what love means. A song from the classic musical "Unsinkable Molly Brown" puts love one way, and maybe not the best way. The show defines love as giving someone whatever they want.

"I'll never say no to you. Whatever you say, I'll do.

"I'll smile when you want me glad, I'll weep if you want me sad. ...

"Today is tomorrow if you want it so.

"I'll stay or I'll go, but I'll never say no."

So, we let our loved ones decide how we ought to love them? Does love just give a person what they want, ...what they think they want? Does a gift say we want more for the person than the person wants?

Yes and no. Love should have something in there about what we want for the person's best. Just giving a person their wants can spoil them and the love shared. But, at least it's better than handing a person some gift we got for them because of our wants from them. You know the gift, the "Here! Take this. It says I love you." ...whether it says it or not.

Marriage is about people giving themselves to each other more than giving each other things. In the "charge to the couple" I have used at weddings, I always say, "You share the dream for the other's tomorrow." We all know the feeling. Real love means our dreams are not single any more. We all have that selfless "what-you-want-and-need" are more important than the "what-I-want-from-you" feeling down there somewhere. In love it works one way much more than the other: It is NOT, "If you love me, you will give me whatever I want. You love me when I get what I want." It IS more: "I love you. I'll try by best to give you whatever I can to say...."

God loves us, but we realize that does not mean that God wants to give us whatever we want. Still,... We hear the instructions even commands – where Jesus is telling us what he wants. Then, the list comes to this place where Jesus is putting us back into the determine-our-destiny driver's seat. After all the commands and shaping of directions in following his lead, we stop on the road, and Jesus says, "What would you like?"

Somehow, we can't imagine Jesus giving us anything we want. And we know that Jesus loves us. We may wonder why, but we know that is more about us than about Jesus. Deep down, as deep as our spiritual DNA, we know that real love – divine love – is in the heart of all of us.

The hesitation we have shows up before Jesus takes a breath, and says, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts, ...how much more will God give good gifts." God knows "good" better than we can ask or imagine, ...or even guess at good.

Yes, we are "bad" at love, evil in our motives, in our self-centeredness. Yet, in spite of us, we still know how to give good gifts. But it is hit-or-miss, isn't it?

Have you seen that HUGE rack of gift cards right there by the checkout at HEB? You can get a card for any store on earth, so all your Christmas shopping in one place at one time, and put your loved ones out into the crowd to find what they want. How convenient? It's really not that it is easier. It's not that we are lazy, really, – maybe.

It's that we are just so unsure. Sometimes we do NOT know what is good to give, "how to give a good gift." We want to take the risk in the surprise and fit and love a gift may say, but our fear that it might not freezes us. Then again, the gift might say how little thought we put into the giving. So we just throw in the towel and pass on the giving. We let them decide. We give our loves the chance to get what they want. We just don't give them a gift.

At least we Presbyterians are honest about our "unsure" in our better moments - at least when we are not covering it by our false certainty and our pride (evil).

We are quick to admit we are not sure, because we have this bias toward evil that has infected us like - a cough that won't go away. It doesn't disable us. It just "depraves" us, warps us by our

wants just enough to make us see someone else's wants in light of our wants. We are afraid that our wants can shape what we want for the other person we love, that the gift will send a hidden message of self-want when we are trying to say that the other person's dreams are where we look in tomorrow.

I'm still friends with an older elder from my days at St. Mark in Boerne. Jack and I were on the golf course one day, when he announced that he and Agnes were celebrating their 40th together. I asked, "Jack, how has Agnes put up with you for 40 years of marriage? What have you bought her for all you have put her through?" He said without hesitation, "I got her a really fine saddle for my horse. ...And she got me the most beautiful red dress I've ever seen."

Sometimes in spite of years of dreams and gifts, commitment and putting-up-with, love forces us to admit we still don't know what to give. But we keep trying!

Look how much more Christ keeps trying to tell us we can love others the way he loves us. "How much more does God know how to give you good gifts!" That's it. "Simple gifts"– that are given to remind us that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

At this table, God is NOT giving you the gift of sacrificing, never-letting-go love to get something out of you. This gift is from the only one you know who really does not need a thing.

God is NOT saying, "You get what you want, and I get what I want." God is saying, "I will change your life. You and I will want the same wants. You will become my flesh and blood in this place and time, and you will know the love and meaning and purpose that I dreamed for you before you were born."

God is NOT saying "I love you. Ask me anything you want?" God is saying, "Take this. This life is the GOOD gift behind all the gifts. I am the bread of your life to sustain you. I am the cup that overflows."

God is NOT saying "I died for you, and you owe me your life. Follow me!" God is saying, "I know the way better than your dreams. Follow me! I will lead you to places that don't just look and feel better. My road is the best, and you will have hope and peace and joy all along the way."

You are invited to the gifts of the table of the Lord.

Come to this table, not because you must, but because you may, not counting any merit of your own but trusting the mercy of Christ your Savior. Come in your sin and receive forgiveness; come in your weakness and take strength; come in your doubt and receive faith, come in your fear and take hope. Whatever brings you to Christ's saving love, come and receive this simple gift of grace that is sufficient for every need - even the ones you don't know.