

God's Gift of Love

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. ~ *Romans 6:23 (NLT)*

Christmas is my favorite season. I have many wonderful memories of Christmas when we were growing up on the farm. As a child during the hard times in the 1940s, I knew we sometimes received help from others. One year stands out to me because two beautiful dolls could not have been afforded by my parents at that time, especially since my brother's gift was a painted red barn made from a cardboard box. We kept one of the dolls and passed the other on to a cousin, sharing the loving gift. No matter what the circumstances, we always felt loved and blessed.

Many years later, Christmas is still always beautiful and exciting to me! I love the way we have a birthday party for Jesus every year — I can just see Him enjoying it with us. It makes me feel like we are celebrating the real meaning of the day. God's love came down at Christmas, and we are the blessed recipients!

Dear Lord, please help this misdirected world to see your truth and believe it. Let everyone seek to receive your gift of love.

Betty Little

Zion United Methodist Church

Presence or Presents

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ~ *Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)*

Year after year my adult kids always ask what they can get me for Christmas. When they were little, I always made sure there were tons of gifts under the Christmas tree, sometimes even wrapping smaller gifts in bigger boxes to give the illusion of big presents. The sight of all the presents under the tree on Christmas Eve gave me great satisfaction. Nowadays, however, I would much rather have their presence versus them getting me an actual present. Moments in time are priceless.

Most of you know my love of watching Santa interact with the kids, with their wide-eyed request of gifts they have on their list. Sometimes those minutes are missed by others while taking a phone call or text messaging during that time. The children tend to stay focused while the parent or guardian misses that moment.

During the Advent season we are reminded that God gave us a gift that is for everyone if we accept it. During this Advent season we are often distracted with the hustle and bustle. Day after day I see little “God winks” of His presence in our lives. Sometimes we miss them, but that doesn’t mean they are not there.

My prayer to all is that we endure through the season with eyes wide open, so that we can be a witness to others of the great present God has given us. Let us fix our eyes on Him so that we become more aware of His presence in our lives.

Father God, may we invite you into our everyday lives so we can watch you show up in extraordinary ways. Allow us to be aware of your present of Jesus so we can have a presence with you.

Bill Schober
Evangelical United Methodist Church

The Voice of the Shepherd

Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. ~ *John 10:5 (NKJV)*

When my husband went home to be with the Lord, I became the main caretaker of our herd of beautiful white Charolais beef cattle. Soon the girls, their calves, and a one-ton bull knew me, and especially my voice. They could be far off in the most distant pasture, but as soon as they heard my squeaky voice calling, “Cow, cow,” they would run to the catch pen for their grain. Or in winter, they would follow me into the feedlot for their hay. They associated my voice with the one who cared for them, fed them, and looked out for their every need. They trusted me.

However, if I brought someone with me that they didn’t know, they would hear my cry, come running, and then skid to a screeching halt when they spied the stranger.

If the stranger spoke, they would either refuse to come into the pen or, in some cases, run back from where they had come. Whenever I needed to pen them up, I made sure never to bring along anyone they didn’t know.

I often think back to my teen years when I began to hear God’s voice calling me. Sitting in a meeting at Hilltop Ranch, a Christian camp for teens, listening to a speaker tell of the Lord’s love for me, so great that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for my sins, I recognized His call. He was the One who loved me, cared for me, and could meet my every need. I ran to Him, seeking the water and food and forgiveness He offered.

I acknowledged that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. First, as I repented of my sins, He declared me as white as one of my newborn Charolais calves, and then He made me His very own child, assured of eternal life with Him.

In a hectic, often dangerous world, I hear many voices calling me: buy this, do that, go there, eat this, don’t say that! I pray that the Lord would always make me as wise and discerning as one of my sweet, dumb cows. She always knows the voice of the one who cares for her, even at a distance.

Heavenly Father, help me to listen above the din of many conflicting sounds for the loving voice of the One who cares for me enough to lay down His life for me.

Sue Shute
Quinton, NJ

Resting in Abba's Lap

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” ~ *Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV)*

God often speaks to us through ordinary things. I have been an animal lover my whole life, and He has given me life lessons many times through my pets.

Recently my 10-year-old kitty, Oscar, needed to have his teeth cleaned. As this is done under anesthesia, he was unable to have any food after 8:00 the night before the surgery. Oscar is used to eating first thing in the morning. I was greeted with pleading eyes and a soft meow as he stood in his usual breakfast location. I explained to him why he couldn't eat. It would pose a danger to him. Of course he didn't understand. He knew that I fed him every morning and appeared confused as to why he was being denied food.

I felt terrible, knowing that he was unable to understand that I was acting in his best interest. I was keeping him safe. I was caring for him out of deep love and a much higher level of knowledge. In a short while, despite his confusion and physical discomfort, Oscar climbed into my lap and fell asleep. He didn't understand, but he still loved me. He still trusted me.

It occurred to me in that moment that I am given that same choice over and over again as I journey through this life. My heavenly Father (Abba) often acts in ways that I don't understand. I pray, and He says no. Or even worse, wait! He doesn't heal that person, or salvage that family relationship, or resolve a conflict in the way I'd prefer. Sometimes that results in my confusion. My anger or resentment. My tears. But my Abba made that decision out of deep love and a much higher level of knowledge. All I need to do is curl up in His lap, leave it all in His loving hands, and rest.

Dearest Abba, may I learn to trust your heart even when I don't understand. May I feel the depth of your unconditional love and know to the core of my being that your ways are best.

Lisa Loiselle
Woodland Baptist Church

Sometimes Things Don't Make Sense

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

~ Luke 1:31 (NIV)

A baby born to a virgin who is fully human and fully God doesn't make sense, but it happened. This baby named Jesus cleansed us from sin and gave us everlasting life.

It doesn't make sense that, during one of the coldest Decembers, a butterfly would emerge, but it happened at my house. I noticed a butterfly on a windowsill in our unheated enclosed back porch.

We use this space to raise butterflies in the summer. There were some chrysalises (cocoons) on the back porch that should overwinter. Normally, those chrysalises would emerge as butterflies in late spring to early summer (warm weather) to start a new generation.

Two thousand years later, God is still performing miracles.

Heavenly Father, thank you for being in the miracle-making business. Thank you for the miracle of Jesus. And thank you, Jesus, for taking our sin so that God could forgive us. Every time I see a butterfly, I know you live.

Kim Tortella

Pitman United Methodist Church

Sending the Right Message

For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ~ 1 John 3:11 (NIV)

One of the reasons I am thankful to live in New Jersey is not having to pump gas. I have been happy for many years to just pull up to the pump and say, “Fill it with regular, please, cash.” However, one day a few years back it came out a little differently as I told the attendant to “Fill it with cash, regular, please.” The attendant was a bit startled by my mistake, but thankfully knew what I meant. I inadvertently sent the attendant the wrong message that day!

When I think about it, there are many times I may be sending someone the wrong message. What about when I am waiting in line, feeling impatient and perhaps showing it with my attitude and body language? Or how about when I am stopped at a red light and rather than leave space in front of my car for someone to pull out, I move up close to the car in front of me so no one cuts in line? The message I’m sending in both of those examples is that I and my time are more important than others. This is definitely not a message I should be sending.

As a Christian, my message to others should always mirror Christ and His love, even in the relative anonymity of my car or in line with strangers. How easy it would be to put forth a positive message instead of a selfish one. Smiling while in line, and even chatting with others, would send the right message and maybe help someone else have a better day. Leaving a space for someone else to pull into traffic is such a small thing but could have a positive impact.

The thing is, I do remember to act with love and try to send the right message to those around me, but not often enough. It is so easy to slip into selfish thoughts and feelings. I have to be vigilant and make a conscious effort to speak and act in a way that shares Christ’s message of love at *all* times. I imagine that many of you may feel the same way — it’s a constant struggle! Fortunately, God knows that we can’t do it right all the time, no matter how hard we try. But I don’t think it matters to God how many times we fail, just that we keep on trying.

God, your gifts of grace and mercy are too wonderful for us to comprehend, but we try in our small ways to extend that grace and mercy to others. Thank you for blessing us as we try to be more like you in all we do.

Beth Price

Zion United Methodist Church

A Change in Plans

Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord. ~ *Hosea 5:4 (NIV)*

Every January, I print out a Bible reading plan. This year, I'm following a plan to read one chapter a day from the Old Testament.

This morning, I followed my usual routine of getting coffee and opening the Bible to the day's chapter. I read Hosea chapter 3 yesterday, so I opened my Bible up to Hosea chapter 4 ... and read chapter 5 instead! But before I realized my mistake, I read verse 4 of chapter 5: *Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord.*

The stark metaphor of prostitution is used throughout the book. But it hit me that this word describes how I often "cheat" on God. I constantly think about the stuff I want to do and plan my day with a list of tasks I want to complete. Thoughts of prayer, or praise, or thanksgiving get squeezed out. I don't "acknowledge the Lord."

This verse says that we can't return to God or see Him by using our own strength; we "have a spirit of prostitution." There's something within all of us (within me) that wants to ignore God. It reminds me of how Jesus said we need to be "born again." Or of Paul writing that we need to allow God to "transform our minds."

Why did Jesus come to our world? I can think of three reasons: to teach us, to pay the penalty of our sins, and to send the Holy Spirit.

I constantly need the Holy Spirit in my life because there's another spirit at work within me ("a spirit of prostitution"). Without Christmas (and Easter), it would be impossible for me to see God or to follow Him in my heart. I'm too bent on listening to my own thoughts and following my own plans.

By the way, the chapter in my plan for today wasn't chapter 4; it was chapter 11! I wasn't even successful at following my own plan! God led me to something better.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your plan of redemption. Thank you for Jesus. Forgive me when my life doesn't acknowledge you, and send your Holy Spirit to guide me into your will.

Larry Bakely
Pitman United Methodist Church

Let Your Light Shine

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. ~ *Matthew 5:16 (NIV)*

The world around us can be very dark. Jesus is clearly calling us to shine our light before others. What light can we possibly offer to people? We see the answer in John 8:12: “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”

There’s the key — Jesus is the Light and we are just the vessels. We only need to follow Him, and He promises to give the light of life to others through us.

What are a few practical ways to share our light?

- Be compassionate, helpful, kind, generous, and grateful.
- Be encouraging and optimistic.
- Stand up for your values — be an advocate for truth.
- Use your God-given talents and skills to help others.
- Be real — we all have a past and we all have struggles.

It sounds so simple and yet so different from our culture of indifference, cruelty, selfishness, pessimism, and compromise.

As we are guided by the Holy Spirit, the light of Jesus will be noticeable in our dark world. Think about the difference one small light can make in a big room. You notice things, right? When others notice the difference in our behaviors and attitudes, this can provide opportunities to share the good news of new life in Jesus Christ. This brings glory to God.

Be patient with folks. Sometimes the light is “blinding” to someone who is living in darkness. Remember where you once were ... lost and stumbling in the dark. As Ephesians 5:8 (NIV) says: *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.*

We need to seek the Lord in His Word and pray every day. Ask for the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts, words, decisions, and actions. As our spiritual batteries are charged, we will then glow with the light of Jesus.

Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus to be the Light of the World. Help us as we celebrate our risen Savior. Give us childlike faith with hearts that sing “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Shine brightly through us, Jesus, and let others see how beautiful you are!

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