

December 20, 2015: A Spacious Christmas: An Uneven Gift Exchange

Luke 1:39-56

Pastor Jenny Smith

A couple weeks ago, we had an early Christmas at my parents house where we exchanged gifts with my siblings. Part of my gifting process is thinking about what the person would really enjoy. Then the other part is worrying the gift I got them wasn't equal in value or effort to what they're getting me!

Well, I had one of those moments with my sister's gift. I had asked what she might like this year and she said a gift card would be just fine. She enjoys shopping. So I got her an Old Navy gift card. When it came time to open her gift to me, I got the little feeling that maybe this was not an even gift exchange. She got me this! (hold up picture clock).

Does anyone else dislike the thought of giving someone a certain kind of gift, only to receive a much more expensive or thoughtful gift in return? It's like we can't stand the thought of the giving exchange being uneven.

I'm a big fan of the TV show Big Bang Theory. It's the story of a group of young socially-awkward physicists who work at CalTech. They somehow manage to live as nerds in a very cool world. Sheldon is the brilliant friend and roommate of Leonard, who amazingly is dating the gorgeous next-door neighbor, Penny. It's Christmas time and Sheldon has prepared by getting a supply of gifts of varying values so that he can present the appropriate gift in response to whatever gift Penny gets him. However, he doesn't expect the gift he receives from Penny.

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlhHTdDqoBc>

Quite an uneven gift exchange!

Let's think about Mary. The mother of Jesus. She received a gift from God. A baby. But it was a confusing gift, wasn't it? She had not been intimate with her fiancé, Joseph. Yet here she was, probably with some morning sickness and hormones raging, wondering what the plan was. Talk about an uneven gift exchange! We don't have record of her asking for anything and boom - the Savior of the world is growing inside of her.

What "gift" has dropped into your life this year that you never planned on? How you respond to it matters. You can resist or avoid...or receive and trust.

How we receive Christ matters.

Is it a joy for you to receive Christ? Do you welcome him warmly this year into your life? Or do you avoid and avert your eyes? Hoping he doesn't come near?

And do we receive Christ thinking we have to return the favor? If so, then we haven't really received Christ.

Receiving can be awkward

Our ego is involved in receiving. Sometimes it takes a hit because we can't manage the situation - we're not in charge - not in control - we resist pure receiving - we want to even the score

When we receive, it puts us on the defensive instead of the offensive - and it's an awkward place to be

"We tend to engineer our lives more than just live them. We are all overstimulated and drowning in options. We are trained to be managers, to organize life so as to make things happen. This is what has built Western civilization. It is not all bad, but if you transfer that to the spiritual life, it is pure heresy. It doesn't work. It is not Gospel. We might be economically rich but not usually spiritually fertile.

If Mary was trustfully carrying Jesus during this time, it is because she knew how to receive spiritual gifts, in fact *the* spiritual gift. She is probably the perfect image of how fertility and fruitfulness break into this world. If we ourselves try to manage God in any way, or even to manage ourselves, we will never bring forth the Christ

but only our small selves. The Eternal Christ, you might say, is precisely *that part of you that you have received as a gift.* Richard Rohr

Thanksgiving story

During our trip to Oregon at Thanksgiving, the adults gathered one evening after the kids were fast asleep to talk about some important things, but after that conversation, my dad pulled out a bag. He reached in and pulled out gift after gift and gave them to different people in my family.

Fraternity mug to Rob, my brother-in-law

His grandfather's tools to Aaron

His father's military service medal and a ring of Dad's to my sister

His first AK license plate and Birchwood camp cross to Jeremy

Ring from my dad's father and his junior high athletic patch went to Ryan

I got his journals from early years in ministry and marriage and a communion cup

They were gifts simply given, not expecting anything in return. We were just meant to receive them. I couldn't match these gifts and I wasn't supposed to.

Control Freaks

I think we miss the point of Christmas when we have such trouble receiving the gift of Jesus himself. We try to control, manipulate, or dismiss the gift of Jesus because we can't even comprehend someone would want to gift us with this. Let's admit it, we're control freaks. Someone giving me the child of the creator of the world who's going to show me how to live and love in a new and beautiful and confusing way? Nope, doesn't sound like an easy gift to me.

Our life and spiritual work is to increasingly let go of our need to control and sink into the beautiful truth that love always wins - and that usually means an uneven gift exchange. Either we're giving love that may not be returned - or we're receiving love that just needs to be received.

How to Receive Christ

If you're having trouble receiving gifts in your life - watch the experts - **children**. Children accept what is said at face value and view receiving love as natural. Maybe that's why Jesus calls his followers to become like children to enter the kingdom of God.

Mary is another model for how to receive Christ. When she was first told the news, it says "she was confused by these words." A couple minutes later she responds, "how will this happen?" Then a couple minutes later she says, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

In Mary's confusion and doubt, she still opened up her soul and received Christ. Literally. She didn't go and try to buy a bigger gift for God to even the score. **Or prove she was worthy. She simply received Christ.**

There's someone in your life who's likely trying to give you some kind of gift but you're having trouble receiving it. Or maybe you don't notice it yet. It could be quality time, their full attention, a new friendship, a hard truth you prefer not to hear. I invite you to prayerfully look around your life this week and ask God to make it clear where you can truly receive a gift. Without thinking about how to return the favor. Just receive the gift with deep joy. And trust that when you receive a gift from someone, you're receiving Christ. Our work of Advent continues just a little longer. May your heart prepare to receive Christ anew in these coming days. Amen.