

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25

## IN THE SPIRIT OF RECEIVING

I recently read a story about a French soldier who was suffering from amnesia. His face had been horribly disfigured by a shell blast at the front, and all of his identification was blown away. When he recovered from his injuries, there was no way of telling who he was. The social services located three possible families he might belong to, on the basis of his general physical description, and made arrangements for him to visit each of the families, in different parts of the country, to see if the families recognized him. The first two visits ended sadly, with no glint of recognition on either side. When he stepped off the train in the third village, something about the station and its environment seemed familiar. As he walked down the street, it all began to come back, and he turned this way and that, growing increasingly surer of where he was, until he arrived at the cottage where his family lived and knew that he was home.

Something like that happens to us as we near Christmas. We get sidetracked as we see Christmas decorations appear in the stores before Halloween. Christmas carols begin playing on our favorite radio station before Thanksgiving. We are bombarded by television commercials and gift catalogues in the mail and stuffed into our newspapers. All of the glitter and lights and holiday blitz can blind us to the true meaning of Christmas, and we are steered off track as we rush around to buy more and more.

And yet, as we draw nearer to Christmas, as we pass through the four Sundays of Advent and we hear the messages of hope, peace, joy, and love, and sing the beloved Advent songs and Christmas carols, the landscape seems more familiar to us. As we encounter Isaiah's prophecy about a young woman, who shall bear a son and his name shall be Immanuel (God is with us), as we marvel anew at Mary's and then Joseph's faithful obedience to the will of God, and we imagine the coos and the cries of the infant Jesus rising up from the manger out back in Bethlehem, it begins to dawn on us who we are and Whose we are. As we draw nearer to Christmas Eve, and pass through all of the familiar landmarks of this holy season, we begin to remember our real identities as the children of God, who loves us so very much God sent the Son. And then, we know that we are home, home where we belong in the loving arms of God.

There will be a time and a place for giving, of course, but as we head home towards Christmas, we do so in the spirit of receiving. After all, if we look closely at Matthew's story of the events leading up to Jesus' birth, for Matthew the emphasis on Christmas is not so much on giving, but in receiving.

Matthew begins his story by giving us a list of Jesus' ancestors. As you would expect, Jesus has quite a family tree. Abraham and King David are listed; in all, there are twenty-seven prophets and kings listed as Jesus' ancestors. There are also four women listed. We would expect to find Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, or perhaps Miriam. Instead, we find Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute, Rahab, who was a prostitute, Ruth, who spent the night with Boaz, and Bathsheba, who was Uriah's wife until she became pregnant by King David. Why did Matthew choose and name these four women in Jesus' genealogy?

It has been suggested that by selecting these four, lesser-known women, Matthew is showing the strange righteousness of God that will include not only the Jews but the Gentiles as well (since Rahab and even Ruth were not Israelites originally). Another plausible possibility is

that each of the four women – with their less-than-perfect, questionable pasts – set the stage for the problem facing Joseph with regard to Mary.

Joseph learned from Mary, to whom he was engaged, that she was with child. Joseph naturally assumed there was a scandal for he knew he wasn't the father of the baby she was carrying. Joseph knew that there could be no marriage. He also knew the Law, which presented him with two options. The first option and the most radical one allowed Joseph to have Mary stoned to death since her pregnancy by another meant she had committed adultery, which was punishable by death. Or, the other option allowed Joseph the opportunity to have Mary publicly humiliated and disgraced; Mary would be ostracized from the community and she would be branded a sinful, adulterous woman.

Being a righteous man, Joseph decided on "none of the above." Instead, he settled on a third choice. He decided to show mercy and break off the engagement privately. Instead of seeking vengeance, Joseph chose to do what was best for Mary and her baby and himself. Joseph wanted to show mercy, grace and love to Mary instead of following the prescriptions of the Law; thus, he decided to dismiss her quietly.

When Joseph had resolved this matter to his own liking, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream in order to correct his thinking and guide him to take back Mary as his wife. There was no scandal involved in her pregnancy. "For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The angel also reminded Joseph of Isaiah's prophecy and how the one to be born shall also be called Emmanuel, "God with us." When Joseph awoke, he did exactly what the Lord had commanded him. Joseph took Mary as his wife, and, when she gave birth to her son (conceived of the Holy Spirit), and yet, their son, Joseph named him Jesus.

In Matthew's telling of that beloved story, we hear that the spirit of Christmas is to receive because Joseph graciously received Mary as his wife. And, Mary, for her part had also been visited by the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would conceive and bear a son, who will be named Jesus, the Son of the Most High. When she asked how that could be since she has not been with a man, the angel told her that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; thus the child to be born will be holy and called Son of God." Upon hearing this startling yet God-filled revelation, Mary opened herself to receive the Word of the Lord by saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Christmas calls forth within us the spirit of receiving the Good News of Jesus' birth. Despite our sinfulness, God, came to us in the Son, born of the woman Mary, and took on the name Emmanuel for God really does desire to be with us. And, because of our sinfulness, God came to us in human flesh in the Christ child, who was named Jesus – why? – "for he will save his people from their sins. We receive that Good News in faith and with gratitude for we know there is nothing we can do or bring to the table to merit our acceptance by God.

All we can do, all we need do, is to open wide our arms, our hearts, and our minds, and receive Christ anew. We not only remember Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and anticipate his coming again, we also celebrate his birth in our hearts this time around. As we make room for him in the inn of our very own lives, we come to the startling realization that, as we receive him anew, we are truly at home in the very Presence of God. We experience Christmas best when we do so in the spirit of receiving.

The true spirit of Christmas is in receiving God's gift of love for us all wrapped up in the newborn baby given to Mary and Joseph in the manger. As we receive the Good News of the

Gospel, then we can live out the good news by participating in the spirit of giving. We receive and then we give. We reach out to others in the same extravagant, incarnational way that God in Jesus Christ has reached out to us and embraced us. As we have received God's grace, we strive to be gracious to others.

I want to end with a story that came this past week tucked inside a Christmas card from a friend. I don't know who the author is but the story is called, The Necklace. The little girl was waiting with her mother at the checkout stand when she saw them – a circle of glistening, white pearls in a pretty, pink foil box. She pleaded with her mother to buy them. The mother told her daughter that she would give her some extra chores and, in no time, she could save enough money to buy them. At last, Jeannie had enough money to buy the pearl necklace. She loved them and wore them everywhere – even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. (Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.)

Every night Jeannie's loving daddy would come upstairs and read her a story before bedtime. One night, as he finished the story, he asked Jeannie, "Do you love me?" She said, "Yes, Daddy. You know that I love you?" "Then give me your pearls." "Oh, Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess the white toy horse with the pink tail." "That's okay, Honey. Daddy loves you. Good night." And he gave her a kiss.

About a week later, after the story time, Jeannie's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?" "Daddy, you know I love you." "Then, give me your pearls." "Oh, Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll and the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper." "That's okay, Honey. Sleep well. God bless you little one. Daddy loves you." And, as always, he kissed her on the cheek.

A few nights later, when her daddy came in, Jeannie was sitting on her bed. As he came close, he saw a tear slide down her cheek. "What is it, Jeannie? What's the matter?" Jeannie didn't say anything; she lifted her little hand up to her daddy and, when she opened it, there was her little white pearl necklace. With a little quiver she finally said, "Here, Daddy, this is for you." With tears in his own eyes, Jeannie's daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime store necklace; and, with the other hand, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jeannie. He had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime-store stuff so that he could give her the genuine treasure.

That story is analogous to the Good News story of the Heavenly Father, who waits for us to give up the things that cheapen our lives so that God can bestow on us the genuine treasure of the Son, who gives so much beauty, joy, peace, and purpose to our lives – in the place of our sins. Jesus gives us new, abundant, and eternal life – in place of our fear of dying. In this holy season, let us receive the greatest gift God has given us in and through the Son, Jesus Christ. Then, in the Spirit of receiving the greatest grace offered to us, let us, in that same Spirit, give of ourselves and gifts of love to others. There's only one thing left to be said: Welcome Home! Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens - First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA - December 19, 2010)