

Sermon Series: "Receiving... Love"
Salem United Methodist Church
Isaiah 40:1-4, 9-11; Luke 2:1-12; 1 John 4:7-14
December 21, 2014
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Today is the last Sunday in Advent. The tradition of this Sunday is that it is the Sunday of Love-the gift given to us in the Christ Child. As 21st century people who say we are Christians, how do we receive this love?

For the last three weeks we have talked about receiving as a process. To receive a gift, we first have to want it. This is why we ask the question, "What do you want for Christmas?" We want to know that the gift we give will be well received. The second part of receiving is waiting for the gift. We don't like to wait in our impulse driven culture. We don't like to wait in line. We don't like to wait in traffic. We don't like to wait for weeks for a package to be delivered. And children have trouble waiting for Christmas to arrive. Many a child has admitted that they just couldn't wait so they searched the house for the places their parents hid their gifts. Then they would sneak a peek. Waiting requires patience which is both a virtue and a spiritual gift. We say, "All good things come to those who wait." Or "God gives in God's time." The third part of receiving is actually opening the gift. If we leave the gift unopened, what good is the gift to us? The fourth part of receiving the gift is embracing it. There are many pictures taken on Christmas morning of children embracing the gift that they have wanted, waited, and opened. To receive the gift one has to accept it, and welcome it into one's life.

One Christmas Eve a five year old daughter wrapped a big box with a roll of expensive gold wrapping paper and placed it under the tree. The mother had special plans for this wrapping paper so when she saw the package wrapped as a child would wrap with her precious gold wrapping paper under the tree, she yelled at the child and punished her for using this special paper. The child accepted her punishment without protest. Then on Christmas morning the little girl gave the gold wrapped present to her mother and said, "This gift is for you, Mommy." The mother was embarrassed for her outbreak the night before. As she carefully tore off the gold wrapping paper and opened the box, she saw that it was empty. Her anger swelled up again and she spoke harshly to her daughter, "Don't you know, young lady, when you give someone a present there's supposed to be something inside the package?" The little girl spoke timidly as tears rolled down her cheek, "Oh, Mommy, the present isn't empty! I blew kisses into it until it was full." The mother was humbled and fell to her knees. She embraced her daughter and begged for forgiveness for her thoughtless anger.

This mother had trouble receiving this gift. It wasn't something she wanted or waited for. When she opened it she was filled with disappointment until she heard just how much love was put into the giving of this gift. To her daughter she was worth every inch of that gold paper.

This story reminds me of how we often receive God's gifts to us. We expect one thing and God gives us something totally different, something we hadn't wanted, but something we needed. From the prophet Isaiah we hear about the gift God is giving the exiled Israelites. They don't know what they want exactly. They don't know what they need either, but God does. He knows that they need comfort in their lonely, frightened state. They have no idea if or how they will ever get out of exile and God says, "I have a gifts for you. First, receive my comfort. Second, I will make a way for you even though you cannot see a way out. And God did make their rough path smooth and their mountains were brought low. But then about five hundred years later, after the people were

ruled by one tyrannical government after another, the people were once again frightened of the present and fearful of their future. The early Christians reflected on these words of Isaiah and claimed them to be a prophecy of the Messiah Jesus born in a stable. Luke is the only reference in the Bible that gives us this manger scene story in Bethlehem. With this baby, the people received a Savior. It wasn't a gift that they asked for, but it was one that they desperately needed. The gift was given quietly. Jesus was born in an obscure place, to an insignificant couple who had no status, no position of influence, no power. They were among the many that had to migrate to a place they had not traveled to before as they were being watched by a ruthless authority. The Messiah, the Son of the Living God, came as a helpless and powerless baby. Luke has his first visitors not to be the mayor of the town, or the Roman soldiers overseeing the census, or the Governor, or even Caesar. Jesus' first visitors are people that this culture deemed as dishonest, filthy people. Shepherds had a very low status in this culture.

Luke is making a statement by having the heavens open and angels announcing the birth of the Messiah to shepherds. Jesus came for sinners, for the lost, the least, for you and for me. Jesus came to save us from our self destructive natures, to save us from greed that consumes our lives, to save us from our violent behavior, from harming others. No matter what form our sin takes, this baby can change our lives. He has the power to forgive us, to teach us a new way of living, and then provide us with the means to do so. This gift of a baby given to us by God gives us the gift of new life, the new way of living today and for all eternity. This is what the Apostle John calls love. This love comes from God. It is God's gift to us. All we have to do is embrace it. Receive this love that God has so graciously given to us: a gift that we haven't asked for, but we so desperately need. When we embrace this gift as John states God remains in us and God's love is made perfect in us. With God's love, then we can truly love ourselves and we can love one another. What does this love look like? For Jesus, it meant dying on the cross for our sins. For us it looks more like Paul's love chapter of I Corinthians 13. Love is patient and kind, slow to anger. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love trusts in God. When love rules, everybody wins. This love never ends. It just multiplies! Love is the reason for the season. Love came down at Christmas. And we need to be reminded of this love everyday especially at Christmas time when we get all stressed. Listen to this rewrite of I Corinthians 13.

“If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love, I'm just another decorator. If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love, I'm just another cook. If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love, it profits me nothing. If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point. Love stops the cooking to hug the child. Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband. Love is kind, though harried and tired. Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens. Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way. Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of love will endure.” So receive the love that Jesus gives.

Resources: *All I Want For Christmas* by James Harnish; *The Birth of the Messiah* by Raymond Brown; *Christmas is Not Your Birthday* by Mike Slaughter; *Not a Silent Night* by Adam Hamilton

