

Peter Bankson: Jesus: God's Gift that Keeps on Giving

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

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Jesus: God's Gift that Keeps on Giving

Scripture

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"

Introduction

We do not get Christmas Sundays very often. Therefore, we do not often have the opportunity to watch the competition of faith and culture in quite this way. As I have read the paper, watched a bit of television and run errands in a few stores, I have been thinking about this competition between faith and culture, and I have been thinking how the culture of this season of gifts might inform my own understanding of God's gift to the world in the coming of Jesus.

This is the day when we celebrate God's gift to us – God's ultimate gift to us – the gift of God's own presence in a human being, living among us to redeem us and show us the way ... the way to usher in God's realm ... the way to redeem this life. What do we make of this gift? How do we receive it, how do we keep it with us ... use it ... consume it ... let it nourish us? How can we celebrate this time of new beginnings with a fresh sense of being present to God? How can we receive the gift of Jesus?

In Seekers Church, we have been engaged in many conversations about redemption, about binding up the brokenhearted. Some of them are global – war and flood – some are national – funding cuts and program priorities, and some are local – how we are and are not living up to the expectations we have of one another. We need God's gift of healing to help us respond as the wounded healers that we are.

This season the stores are offering up different kinds of gifts:

- Some gifts are hard goods – given to be used as they are.
- Some gifts are consumables – given to nourish or delight us and disappear in the process.

- Some gifts are ingredients – given to invite us into the process of making something, of being co-creators, or participants in bringing the gift home to its ultimate purpose.

God's gift of Jesus is all of these ... and more. As I have thought about it, I have realized that, with a bit of a twist, one of those memorable old cultural advertising slogans fits here: "Jesus is the gift that keeps on giving!"

God's Gift and Our Gifts

Let me start with a few reflections on these different kinds of gifts.

I have a new pair of slippers under the tree. They are an exact replacement for the pair that it took me about ten years to wear out. It will not take me any time at all to put this gift to use. Some hard goods gifts do not wear out, though. On the tool wall above my workbench at home, I have a small selection of hand drills that my father gave me when I was in high school in Japan. These drills are one kind of hard goods, tools to help me make things, to help me find images to express what is rising up inside me. Most of us have tools like these – our saucepans, our laptops, our cameras, our leotards – all durable goods that support us as we live out God's call on our lives.

In addition to hard goods, there are those consumable gifts. This year we have received some very thoughtful gifts of special food. The gift of food can be more than momentary sustenance. There is a note of deep gratitude on our bulletin board from a family that received one of the 200+ Thanksgiving food baskets that were prepared by Covenant Christian Community Church, our downstairs neighbor. Margreta and Jeffrey helped prepare those baskets while they were in the midst of their long wait to welcome Oslin into their family. I wonder how the gift of Jesus is like a gift of food, a

consumable, offered to nourish or delight us.

Other gifts are ingredients, given to invite us into the process of making something, of being co-creators, or participants in bringing the gift home to its ultimate purpose. Food for thought: I was thinking about how regular reading of Scripture, and prayer, often contribute to something else, to building something or getting together with someone to walk together or share the joy and pain of living in these troubled times. How is God's gift of Jesus, the little baby lying in the manger, a gift that keeps on giving?

These reflections led me to a few parables for this Christmas Day. Therefore, here are three parables that might help you think about God's gift to us in the coming of Jesus.

God's gift of Jesus is like a Leatherman Multitool

When God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the day the tinkerer got a Leatherman multitool. The tool was one of those hard goods, gleaming stainless steel with fourteen functions – knife and saw, screwdrivers and pliers, awl and opener, and two rulers, in metric and English. From that day forward, the tinkerer went about the community ready to help in ways never before imagined – slicing meat in the kitchen for the community Christmas Eve supper, sawing through the ice dam on the roof to help reduce the roof leak, tightening the legs of the Ikea wooden tables, smoothing the maple on the reredos and keeping his nails trimmed. Before that day, the tinkerer had to go to the basement every time someone needed help, and look high and low for the right tool. Now the multitool was always there, always ready to empower the imagination of the tinkerer. Moreover, there were times when novel solutions to vexing problems came to mind just because the tool was at hand.

When God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the day the tinkerer got a Leatherman multitool. When it looks

like hard goods, God's gift of Jesus is a gift that keeps on giving, empowering us to do what needs to be done to keep things working – loving, reconciling, forgiving; confessing; accepting the love of God and others.

God's gift of Jesus is like a Tree-Ripened Grapefruit

Alternatively, when God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the woman who gave tree-ripened grapefruit to her mission group.

Last Thursday, after a long but productive meeting of the emerging Time & Space Mission Group, Sue Johnson gave each of the members of the group a tree-ripened grapefruit, a very consumable gift. She told us that she gets a box of them every year. This year's shipment had arrived that day and she wanted us to share her juicy, tasty delight. As I held that heavy, golden fruit in both hands I felt the anticipation of consuming it, and I was filled with memories of other times when I had eaten juicy, tree-ripened fruit. The gift of that grapefruit will be gone as soon as I eat it, but I will be nourished by it and the joy of eating it will be added to my memory of other fresh fruit given and received.

Some gifts are consumables – given to nourish or delight us and disappear in the process. In some ways, the joy of receiving the baby Jesus is soon gone. By January 8, we will be focused on the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. All the focus on "Baby Jesus" will be gone for the year and we will be turning to where the path with Jesus is taking us. But today, as we see the child in the manger, as we welcome Oslin Silverstone to our family of faith – today when I eat this juicy gift I will celebrate the ways that when God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the woman who gave tree-ripened grapefruit to her mission group.

God's gift of Jesus is like a jar of stones, waiting to be drilled into beads.

On the other hand, when God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the woman who gave a jar of little agates to one who wanted to be an artist.

Last year Wini White brought me a jar of polished stones, ingredients for some project yet to be conceived. She knew I had a drill with a diamond bit and was interested in learning how to turn stones into beads. She gave me these potential beads, just waiting to be drilled and turned into something interesting. They have been sitting on my workbench since the day Wini gave them to me, right next to the drill, along with some beach glass that Tiffany gave me for the same reason. They are a reminder that I want to spend more time in my studio. That feels both encouraging and discouraging, but both are important parts of my spiritual journey.

When God comes among us in the person of Jesus it is like the woman who gave a jar of little agates to one who wanted to be an artist. The gift of Jesus may be the ingredient for some new call from God. Many of us have had the experience of having something that was stored for a long time become the essential ingredient for what is to come. A familiar passage of Scripture unexpectedly burst forth in a new understanding; a concept you worked with years ago in a class in the School of Christian Living becomes the focus for some prophetic action; a jar of agates waits expectantly for you to take up your tools and begin to co-create.

Jesus, the baby in the manger grew up to be a carpenter, and a storyteller. He knew the power of a good joke. He appreciated good tools and fine wood. From what I have heard, he was not much for giving stuff, but he certainly was generous with his time and his loving, compassionate attention. He met with lots of different folks and gave them what they needed to be on the way with him. And, he let others give to him as well.

Closing

So, let us see where we are. There are different kinds of gifts:

- Some gifts are hard goods – given to be used as they are.
- Some gifts are consumables – given to nourish or delight us and disappear in the process.
- Some gifts are ingredients – given to invite us into the process of making something, of being co-creators, or participants in bringing the gift home to its ultimate purpose.

God's gift of Jesus is all of these ... and more. The Gospel of John says it with a sense of mystery: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory..."

As a faith community called to be with Jesus, we are blessed with these gifts, blessed and called to pass them along, to "give forward" as the movie of a year ago suggested. We can help each other be wounded healers in this troubled time, journeying with Jesus in this time and place, bringing the Good News into being.

This is the day when we celebrate God's gift to us – God's ultimate gift to us – the gift of God's own presence in a human being, living among us to redeem us and show us the way ... the way to usher in God's realm ... the way to redeem this life. Jesus is God's gift that keeps on giving!

Amen.

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