

1 Peter 4:7-11

Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and *he'll* get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!

1 Peter 4:10

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

November 17, 2019

1 Peter 4:7-11 (the Message) and vs. 10 (NKJV)

Christmas Music...Already? A Stewardship Sermon on Gifts and Expectations

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Chuck and I got to spend all day Monday together. Mondays are usually my day off, but he had the holiday for Veterans Day, and Ryleigh still had school. I consider it a parental win! We didn't have a particular agenda other than hanging out together and having lunch out, so we went to the Short Pump Towne Center to do a little walking and shopping. Remember that I said this was Monday, November 11. Well I forgot that I had heard on the radio that Santa was due to arrive at the Short Pump mall the previous weekend. The decorations were abundant, and the music already playing. We had absolutely NO intent of doing any Christmas shopping, but there it was, all the clues, all the pressures, all the expectations making it seem like the ho – ho – ho holiday would be just around the corner. And if that weren't enough, Amazon is now sending out an official toy catalog which arrived at our house the week before that. It's not even the Sunday BEFORE Thanksgiving yet and one local radio station has already switched to the all-Christmas music format. My daughter loves it, but I think that its primarily because it's easy to get a rise out of me when the Jingle Bells start jingling before December first.

I don't want to sound too bah humbug about the festive part. We leave strings of holiday lights on our deck all year-round. And I am ready for some "hot cocoa" kind of weather. But since we are talking today about gifts and expectations, I want to remind you that the decorations at the mall serve a different function than putting up decorations at your house. The Christmas music on the radio isn't about preparation for receiving the holy child of Bethlehem. Rather, the Apple store is

hoping that a few Christmas tunes will get me thinking about upgrading my iPhone for Christmas, and I know that the jewelry ads on the radio are just going to get increasingly obnoxious as the season approaches. For merchants of a fairly broad range of categories, the November/December gift giving season is where they count on people feeling like there's just one more thing they need to get, or one more person they need to buy for. Stores don't care about you being sensible about your budget; they are interested in filling you up with the spirit of Christmas guilt until the dreaded spending hangover hits home in January. Our feelings have become a coveted market commodity. Marketing experts are taught how to manipulate us with our own inadequacies, guilt, and the desire to please others close to us. Thus, Christmas gift-giving becomes a high-stakes cultural expectation, whether or not you have any religious associations with the holiday, or just anticipate when Santa is going to be making his rounds.

But if we focus on the religious calendar year rather than the shopping countdown, today is a day to focus on *gifts* in a very different kind of way. It is Fall Stewardship time, the time where we talk about the giving and receiving of gifts as part of God's plan for humankind. There can be a lot of expectations wrapped up in this process as well. The leadership of the church could thank the members for their generosity, and we typically do. The Stewardship chair could make a plea for the things we want to have funded in our church budget, and he or she usually does. The pastor might give a carefully worded message about money without saying so much that anyone's feathers get ruffled, or she may choose to be direct when it comes to gifts and expectations and speak some uncomfortable truths. Maybe she will do a little of both.

You know that old saying, it's not the gift, but the thought that counts. Today, I want to talk about those thoughts – the ones that heal and the ones that wound. Gift giving is one of the five love languages according to Gary Chapman's 1992 best-selling self-help book still being used in

couples' therapy even though it was never tested for any psychological validity. His premise about our preferences for how we give and receive love in relationships just seemed to resonate with so many people that it has been taken as gospel truth, and I can see why. It is 100% true that some people show love or receive love through the giving and receiving of gifts. It's a basic observation that anyone could make, especially if you've ever been part of the "magic" of Christmas as they say. There are times when it isn't all that magical. If you've ever experienced disappointment in a gift that didn't feel like the other person knew you, or if you've ever spent ages in picking just the right gift to have it be met with a not-so-spectacular thank you, this may ring completely true for you. You know the disappointment experienced in not getting the "love" you expected as the wrapping paper exposes what's inside. Indeed, the giving and receiving of gifts is both so socially ingrained and so culturally conditioned that it can have deep ramifications in our closest relationships and it can vary wildly even from family to family, let alone from culture to culture. We may think we are sending a clear message with our gifts – but like with any other language – the language of gifts can be wildly misinterpreted.

So, our verse for today is about gifts, and the sentiment seems rather sweet on the surface. *As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as stewards of the manifold grace of God.* But I'd like to unpack this verse specifically today in light of our stewardship season, in the shadow of the invasion of Christmas pressure, and to remind us just how important it is not only to give but to receive gifts well.

It is stewardship time and two things stand out in this verse for me that relate to the typical themes of stewardship in the church. The first is the acknowledgement that each person's gift is unique and special, important in their own lives and in the mind of God. If we are the receivers of such gifts, it is only right to presume that God is the giver. God gives us what we need not only to

survive, but also so that we can contribute to the life of the community. Peterson's interpretation of this text spells it out a little clearer. Some can give a meal to the hungry or a bed to the homeless. Because of God's bounty, we are encouraged to be generous, and then our eyes will be opened to acknowledge a multitude of these gifts and a significant number of ways to share them. God's gifts are ABUNDANT, not scarce, and we don't have to wait in a long line to get the latest and greatest before they all run out. Hear that, please. We may be better with words or more confident in actions. We may be musicians and artists, or gifted with spreadsheets and budgets. We may have the resources to fund a project, or the time to give an entire afternoon to helping a friend. Regardless, we have a responsibility to use what we have been given to magnify the grace of God in the world. Our gifts are not to be hoarded – but shared, ministering to each other so that the grace of God will be evident.

Even as I promote this “Give generously” message I am aware that doing so with the ever-present musical reminder that Santa Claus is coming to town is problematic. We live in a culture that guilt and shames us through this process of gift-giving. Because we have heard loud and clear that gift-giving is about love-giving, we equate the two in ways that aren't helpful when it comes to the spiritual practice of generosity. Generosity isn't a quid pro quo game. Generosity is giving without expectation of thanks or the expectation that we will get anything in return. And yet giving away one's spiritual gifts doesn't lead to the January credit card hangover. It actually increases the power of the gift to have it shared. We have to untangle our Santa messages from the incarnational message that Jesus was born into this world to talk about a love that has no limits and isn't relegated to just one season of the year. We need to remember that gifts in the spiritual sense go beyond money and are not limited to those with whom we already have established relationships. Spiritual gift-giving presses us toward our uncomfortable edges and reminds us that when scripture tells us to minister those gifts to each other, it means to ALL people, not just those in our church and community, but

pressing outward beyond our borders to reach those in need. The thought in mind has to be the sharing of God's grace in the world rather than "what I get out of it" or the "pat on the back" that I might receive. Yes, it is the thought behind it that counts or else the gift can become a means of exerting power over others. Because I give x, y, or z to my church, they owe me... or Because I give to all these charities, I'm such a good person... isn't what this verse has in mind for us.

Which brings me to the last observation where I really get to meddling. We all have gifts. We are encouraged to give those gifts generously, AND... in the community that God calls together, we have to be ready to receive the gifts that will demonstrate to us the power of the manifold grace of God. The problem is that we all have expectations that the community of the church will run in certain ways, that things will be done according to tradition, and that little will change in the life of the church. If someone has a gift to give that doesn't fit our typical mold, and we are reluctant or maybe even snobbish about receiving it, we may just be turning away an opportunity to recognize God's gifts in our midst. There are painful tales to be told about how churches are losing members – not because of theological or political reasons – but because the gifts an individual had to offer were not received by the established old guard of the congregation. The most cringy one I've heard, one which was told to me as the absolute truth, was about the new member who brought a jello salad to the church potluck. Like everyone else, she brought her contribution to the buffet set up before worship, much like many of us have done today for the Stewardship lunch. But when she gets to the fellowship hall to attend the lunch, she doesn't see her dish. So, she goes into the kitchen to ask about it where she finds an established member of the church scraping her jello salad into the trash. As that horrified look is given, the person responds, "Here at this church, we don't put fruit in our jello salads."

My friends, we need to take every action imaginable not to be THAT church. It's tough I know. We have all had those times when we have hurt someone because we just weren't thinking about what it was that we were saying. There was a time when I was adamant about not singing any Christmas carols during Advent, and the only thing that action served was my seminary education snobbery. I've argued my position on any number of things thinking I had the upper hand theologically – but I've found that's not where I need to be. I'm much happier when I resist forming expectations and allow congregation members to teach me – whether they are the established ones who know the deep history and where all the bodies are buried, or whether they are the enthusiastic newbies who have an idea for how to do things differently. We have to listen, to learn, and to receive the gifts that each person has to gift, presuming completely that the gift they have to bring may well be the gift that God has given them to share. I know it's not easy, but I promise it's what God is doing to revive the tiredness of the church. In a long-standing church like this one is, feelings will get hurt, and we will have regrets about dumb things we will say. The good news is, the gifts keep returning and giving us opportunities to try and try again to see every single angle of God's grace.

I'll end on a story about our most interesting Christmas day as a family because it was precisely because NOTHING turned out as planned that we met up with an evening of experiencing the manifold grace of God. One of the years we lived in Tennessee, we decided we would get up early on Christmas day for the kids to open presents, then make the 9-hour trip to see family so we could be there technically on December 25. It was all working out pretty well until we started getting close to Winchester, Virginia. The closer we got, the more the snow was becoming the kind of blinding snow that no one wants to drive through. Knowing that it would get worse as it gets more mountainous where my family lives, we made the only decision safe to make, and got a hotel for the night. When we checked in, we were the ONLY family staying at this Holiday Inn. The

front desk attendant had set up a scrabble board with her boyfriend in the lobby. We had to figure out where would be open for us to get some dinner, and the only answer was the Sheetz convenience store not that far from the hotel. We each ordered our favorite subs, Chuck and I got some beer from the chiller, and we went back to the hotel, ate and put on our swim suits to get in the pool – which we brought ahead of time so we could get into the hot tub at Chuck’s parents’ house. It was our closest family Christmas we ever had even though it was probably the most untraditional. It was incarnational grace, in the form of convenience store sandwiches and a hotel swimming pool. Is it what we would have expected or chosen? Probably not. But it was the grace of God showing up, as the Spirit does, in wholly unexpected ways.

Treasure the gifts. Be generous with your own. And receive the unexpected with joy. And if you start humming the Christmas songs early, I promise, you won’t hear any complaints out of me. Amen.