

**LOVE – GOD’S GIFT****John 3:16**

**Intro:** Many of you know I’m a John Ortberg fan. I love his books, I love his humor and I love his way of clearly explaining Bible truth. Many of my heroes have fallen over the years – so if you know any dirt on John, please don’t tell me.

Anyway I read a great sermon that John gave to his congregation at Menlo Park Presbyterian in California and it fit perfectly as a wonderful resource for this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent talk here at ABC. I’ve adapted his main points and developed it to fit us and for this time we find ourselves in.

Ortberg begins this way, “*Christmas can be a complex season to navigate. There is shopping to get done. All the busyness, the running around. There are office parties, and after office parties are family gatherings, and after family gatherings are therapist appointments ... Then you add our current economic uncertainty, and I wonder: What would it take for this year to be the best Christmas ever? How would we know? What is the standard?*” (End Quote)

Good question! What would it take for it to be the best Christmas? And then I got to thinking about how, this has certainly been the craziest Christmas for me. It’s always a great time for me. Even with a frenetic schedule and a myriad things to do, AND deer hunting, I never tire of the wonder of this season. Yes, every year I go home after our Christmas Eve service and crash – I’m exhausted. But it’s a satisfied exhaustion that comes from celebrating the true reason for the season.

But my crash happened earlier this year, practically a month early – and it was, quite, literally a crash, where I hit a patch of ice on a sidewalk and took a spectacular fall that broke my leg and badly sprained my ankle.

I wasn’t expecting this. I didn’t want this. Most of what I do at Christmas came to an abrupt halt. And, sadly, what I do, too often, helps me to feel useful. Suddenly I felt useless. Suddenly it all changed. Christmas would be different in 2018.

But that didn’t faze God. God, the Son came into humanity to save useless people. It’s because . . .

**God is a giver, not a taker.**

- To see this we need to simply open our Bibles. The back story for Christmas is right here and it’s not necessarily where you think it is. You see, the Christmas story for us is where we spent the first three Sundays of Advent, in Luke 1 and 2; or in Matthew 1 and 2. But the first Christmas was awesome, and they didn’t have a New Testament or advent wreathes and candles. But what that first Christmas had and what we still have is represented in one word. LOVE!
- And you recoil and ask, but we knew that! We knew that love is all around at Christmas. It’s what a lot of Christmas songs are about, like *I’ll Be Home For Christmas*, and *All I Want For Christmas Is You*, and *Blue Christmas*, right? Well, kinda. But most of those maudlin and “romantic” Christmas songs are about love missed, or love lost. The love that made the first Christmas awesome is that it was love gained. And here are those words, straight from the Bible that would launch Christmas: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* John 3:16.
- And again you say, “But we knew that!” And I ask in response, “Did you, really?” Have you ever realized what it took for God to send his very Son into this crazy world? It is the greatest love. He loves so completely, that he gave so completely. That is what shows he’s a giver and not a taker. He came into this sin saturated and messed up world and loved and restored and still does. You see. . .

**God gives lavishly and continually.**

- In Ortberg’s words, “*God’s generosity isn’t just lavish, not just creative; it is continual. It is ceaseless. It is unstoppable.*” The prophet Jeremiah was known as the “Weeping Prophet”. He was God’s spokesman to God’s wayward people in a particular grievous time in their history. As a result we have a book in the Old Testament entitled Lamentations that is attributed to him. But even in the midst of that long lament, Jeremiah wrote, *Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* Lamentations 3:22-23. Because in the midst of our unfaithfulness he still loves and he still gives. Every morning, his mercies are new. Every day, there is a fresh opportunity. There are sunrises and sunsets that take our breath away. There are little ones who hug us and say “I love you!” or something that sounds an awful lot like that. There are friends who show up

just when we need them most. We have wondrous thoughts that remind us that his Spirit is active in our hearts. His compassions (or mercies as some translations say it) go on and on and on.

- God's giving goes on and on and on and on and it is from him that we take our cue that . . .

**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**

- Jesus himself said that. We don't have it recorded in the Gospels, but Paul quoted him as saying that in Acts 20:35, and that's Gospel enough for me. And it fits his profile. He came, he saw, he served, he loved, he died, and he rose again.
- The Son, whom we celebrate at Christmas, even called out to his Father to spare the very ones who were crucifying him. That's love. Even as he received the full onslaught of a most hateful and torturous execution he could only give love. And he received the full burden of the sin of humanity for his generosity.
- So we need to celebrate the love that came down at Christmas by passing it on. The God who loved us enough to give his only Son, and the God who loves so lavishly and continually, would naturally want his people to be so giving as well.
- How do we do that? In this season of giving:
  1. We need to boldly tell others that the basis of Christmas is love and not whether or not the retailers have a good year or not. The true basis for Christmas is – we can't hear it enough – *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* God wants all to know about that love. That's why Jesus told us to go and tell others about him. (Matthew 28:18-20). Some worry that telling others about Jesus might cause them to not like us or otherwise damage a relationship. That's a necessary risk that comes with the territory of loving someone enough to tell them about what will bring abundant life and eternal life. Tell others.
  2. We need to give of our resources. Last week we provided Christmas to two families who struggle financially. It was a wonderful thing to see that carload of gifts and food heading out to Associated Charities. We don't have to reserve that kind of giving to the Christmas season, you know. Need goes on 365 days a year. The God who lavishly loves us and selflessly gave to us, prompts us by his Spirit to meet needs in big and small ways. From paying for the meal of the person behind us in line at the Wendy's drive-through, to buying the groceries for the elderly couple behind you in the grocery store. Go ahead and try it once. You'll get a glimpse of the lavish love that made your salvation possible. And you'll see that truth that, here I go again: YOU REALLY CANNOT OUTGIVE GOD. There are a myriad other ways too. Like giving to the SPICE program. Love makes it happen. Love makes it work. And love makes it a joy.
  3. We need to give ourselves. Jesus did. There is a Christmas song that, for some reason is not in the Christmas section of our BIC Hymnal, and it begins with  
*Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,  
When Thou camest to earth for me;  
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room  
For Thy holy nativity.*  
Think about the great love that brought Jesus to be born in a stinky stable. Think about what it took. He gave of himself. He gave everything. But, maybe you say, "But it was easy for him, he's God." And that's true. But he was man too. For 33 or so years he was just like you and me. He experienced pain and loss and poverty and hunger, and betrayal, and then death. But he gave, and gave, and gave, and gave. And it was because of his great love. Paul put it this way, *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Romans 5:8. That's what he did with his time. What can we do? You don't have to look very far to see any number of ways to serve. It could be in children's ministry here at ABC. It can be visiting a lonely person. There are little things and big things you can do with your time to pass on the love of Jesus. Finally . . .
  4. We need to live the love of Jesus. There is a lot of anger in this world. There is a lot of hatred in this world. Let's not be carriers. One of the most profound things I've ever heard was at the funeral

of President Bush earlier this month. His friend Alan Simpson was eulogizing him and said that both his and Bush's mothers both knew that "*Hate corrodes the container it is carried in.*" Make sure the container that is you carries the love of Jesus. Gentle the world you walk in. Live the love of Jesus.

**Conclusion:** That is how we can make this a Christmas of Love. That is how we can take the love that came down at Christmas from a lavishly loving God and pass it on. That's how you have the greatest Christmas every year. It's God's gift, the gift of love. Amen.