

“CHRISTMAS GIFTS (#4):THE GIFT OF THE HUMBLE SERVANT”

(Luke 1:47-55; Luke 1:26-38)

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[Prop Needed: Surprise Wrapped Christmas Gift Representing a Humble Servant]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-21-08]

–I–

1. Advent Wreath Reading: Luke 1:47-55
[ALL Services:] Read Text: Luke 1:26-38 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing a series called Christmas Gifts in which we’re talking about some of the “gifts” that God our heavenly Father desires to give to each of us.

A–So far we’ve talked about the gifts of Hope, Comfort, and Joy, and we’ve introduced them each week by opening a surprise package containing something that represents them.

B–This week our focus is learning how to be a **HUMBLE SERVANT** for God, so let’s see what the worship team has wrapped up to represent it... **[OPEN GIFT and briefly talk about how it relates to “Humble Servant”...]**

3. Now, today’s theme comes from the biblical story in Luke 1 of the dialogue between the angel Gabriel and Mary when she is told that she’ll bear God’s son.

A–In fact, both of today’s two scriptures – both the Advent reading of Mary’s song (often called “The Magnificent”) and second scripture I just read – tell us that Mary’s response to Gabriel was a humble, receptive willingness to become a servant for God. ¹

B–And so, what I want to do today is use Mary’s example to briefly talk about what it means to be (like her) a humble servant for God. ²

–II–

4. From today’s stories, we learn first of all that a humble servant *for* God makes themselves **AVAILABLE** to be used *by* God.

A–Remember that in Verse 38, Mary responds to Gabriel’s announcement that she’s been chosen to bear God’s son by saying, [NRSV] “*Here am I, a servant of the Lord...*” [MSG] “*I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve...*” – she’s literally saying “*Whatever God says, I accept.*”

1–Now, of course, this is a lot easier said than done, because when God calls, *most* of us (myself included) more often tend to answer with excuses and rationalizations about why we *can’t* do that to which God is calling us.

2–And that’s what makes Mary’s response here all the more remarkable.

B–You’ve heard me say before: God is not as interested in our *ability* as our *availability*.

1–And by human standards, Mary wasn’t very “able” – she didn’t come from an influential family or have high social status, or have great worldly wealth.

2–But in simply making herself *available* to be used by God, Mary says in Vs. 48 of the Advent wreath text, “*God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*”

C–You see, you and I may not think we have great talents or skills or finances or abilities, but if we’ll offer what have to be used by God, He’ll bless and multiply them to touch the hearts and lives of others. ³

D–That’s the lesson of the “Christmas In A Grocery Bag” skit (e.g., making what we already have available to be used by God for others), and that’s the lesson of the humble servanthood of Mary, as well. ⁴

5. A second thing we learn from today’s scriptures is that God’s humble servants **ACKNOWLEDGE AND TRUST** God’s larger plan.

A–In the last part of Verse 38, Mary says, “*Let it be with me... [NRSV] ...according to your word [MSG] ...just as you say.*”

1–In other words, a humble servant has the faith both to believe and trust that their calling and their task is part of a purpose & plan that is larger than themselves. ⁵

2–And that faith enables them to carry on even when the immediate circumstances and situation don’t add up, or like you’re not making any difference at all.

B–Now, this is precisely where a lot of us get stuck, even as people of faith: Oh, we make ourselves available to serve God, but then we turn around and want to control *how* and *where* and *who* we serve.

1–“*God, I’ll do anything and go anywhere you want, just don’t make me do this or that, or send me there, or make me have to do ministry with those folks.*”

2–Or what about... “*Lord, we want our church to grow, but please don’t make us have to change anything to do that!*”

C–You see, at some point, we have to be able to know and understand that if God calls us to some specific task or activity, then He’s got a larger purpose and plan in mind, and we need to be willing to give up control of the details of *how* and *who* and *where*. ⁶

6. Finally, I believe that today’s two scriptures also teach us that a humble servant for God is one who is **STEADY AND DELIBERATE** in their service – that is: they live out their servanthood one day at a time over the long haul.

A–Now, I’m not taking this quality from just one, single scripture, but from the totality of what we know happened to Mary over the rest of her life:

1–Consider that Mary’s call to serve God didn’t end when the angel Gabriel left her at the end of today’s story.

2–No. She had to carry Jesus in her belly for nine months, with all the cravings and morning sickness of a pregnant mother. And it didn’t even end on Christmas day when Jesus was born!

3–No. She still had to raise him and teach him about life and love and the grace of God – I mean, where do you think Jesus learned his gentleness and his great humility if not from his mother Mary?

4–And the scriptures tell us that she was even there at Golgotha when Jesus was hanging on the cross about to die – e.g., for rest of her life, she was a servant for God, humbly living out the calling she first received in today’s story.⁷

B–The point I want to make here is that humble servants for God are not called to serve in one great blaze of glory, but instead to serve each and every day, a little at a time – that our service for others should not be a one-Sunday-a-year or one-day-a-week thing, but an every-week and every-day-of-the-year thing.⁸

C–Author and preacher Fred Craddock explains it like this:

“We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1000 bill and laying it on the table to say ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all!’ But [biblical servanthood means] that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1000 bill for quarters. We [then] go through life putting out 25¢ here and 50¢ there...listen to the neighbor kid’s troubles instead of saying, ‘Get lost’; go to the committee meeting at church; give up a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home; etc. [So,] giving our life to Christ isn’t [usually] glorious, [but instead is]... done in all those little acts of [service], 25¢ at a time.”⁹

1–Friends, how do *you* serve God? Do you think it’s got to be in big, flashy things that you can get out of the way every once in a while (twice a year, perhaps), and then get on with your “normal” life?

2–Or do you serve Him in little ways – like Mary – steadily and deliberately living out your faith each and every day?

–III–

7. You see, if we want to be a humble servant for God (like Mary) then means that we’re to be **Available** to be used *by* God, to be able to **Acknowledge & Trust** God’s larger purpose and plan for our life, and to be able to live out our life of service **Steadily & Deliberately**.

A–I want end today with a heartwarming story shared by one our Sunday School classes at their Christmas party just last week that illustrates these three qualities of a humble servant, and a I share it with you today with their permission:

Saved by Love ¹⁰

“Jean Thompson was a no-nonsense elementary school teacher who gathered her students around her the first day of school for “the talk.” “Boys and girls,” she began, “I love each one of you alike. You are all precious to me, and I will have no favorites in this class.” That sounded good, but it was not quite the truth. Teachers are human, and they do have students they naturally like more than others. There was one student in Jean Thompson’s new class that she found difficult to like at all. His name was Teddy Stoddard. Teddy never seemed to bathe. His clothes were unkempt and smelled vaguely musty all the time. When she asked him a question, Teddy would answer in monosyllables or sit with a glassy stare and not respond at all. He was not a good student. Jean admitted she took special satisfaction in marking x’s on Teddy’s papers with an unusual flair of her red pen. It did not hurt her in the least to place a large “F” on the top of Teddy’s assignments; she did not like him.

If Jean had reviewed Teddy Stoddard’s permanent record, she might have understood him better. The notes went something like this: First grade: Teddy shows promise, but has difficulty concentrating. His home life is unstable. Second grade: Teddy is a good boy, ; , but he is so serious. He has trouble getting along with the other students. Then a small note, scribbled in the margin that year: “Teddy’s mother terminally ill.” Third grade: Teddy is depressed. He’s falling behind the rest of the students. His mother died this year. Fourth grade: Teddy is hopelessly behind. He is a deeply disturbed young man who may need psychiatric help. I don’t know what to do with him.

The records were there, but Jean Thompson did not read them—and she did not understand Teddy. December came, and on the last day before the Christmas holidays, the children brought gifts to exchange with one another and gifts for their teacher. All of them were brightly wrapped except one. It was covered in brown paper and scotch tape, and it was marked “from Teddy for Mrs. Thompson.” She was surprised that Teddy brought a gift at all. When she opened it, however, the class began to laugh. It contained a rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a half-used bottle of perfume. But something in Jean told her to make a fuss, and she put the bracelet on, holding up her wrist for all to see, as she dabbed it with perfume. “Isn’t it beautiful,” she asked, and the children nodded in agreement.

That afternoon, when the children scrambled out of the room at the final bell, Teddy approached Mrs. Thompson’s desk. He had never come forward to speak to her before. “Mrs. Thompson,” he said, “you smell like my mother used to smell—and her bracelet looks good on you, too. Thank you for liking my presents.”

When he walked out, Jean Thompson sank to her knees and prayed, “God, I sought to be a teacher of facts and not a lover of children. Forgive me for misunderstanding Teddy.” And the next morning she arrived in class a changed teacher. She began to take an avid interest in every child in her class and especially in Teddy. She tutored him so that he was able to catch up to the other students. She looked for things that she might praise him for, no matter how small they might seem. Teddy had never encountered that kind of love before, and he blossomed in the light of her encouragement. It was a good year for Teddy.

The next year brought another class of children to Mrs. Thompson’s class, and Teddy moved on. Many years went by before she received this note: “Dear Mrs. Thompson: I graduated from high school today, second in my class. I thought you might want to know. Love, Teddy Stoddard.” Four more years passed, and she received another note: “Dear Mrs. Thompson: I graduated valedictorian from the university, even though it was tough working and studying – but I liked it. Love, Teddy

Stoddard." A few more years went by, and Mrs. Thompson thought of Teddy now and then and wondered how he was getting along. She was thrilled when she received this brief letter from her former pupil: "Dear Mrs. Thompson: You can now call me Theodore J. Stoddard, M.D. Would you ever have believed it? By the way, I'm getting married on July 26th, and I would love for you to come and sit where my mother would have sat. You're all the family I have since my dad died this year. Love, Teddy."

Jean Thompson went to Teddy's wedding, and she sat in the place of honor that would have been his mother's. She sat there because she deserved that distinction. She had recognized promise in this mother-less child and poured her heart into his education for those few months many years before. Her interest gave him confidence. Her tutoring grounded him in the basics. Her kindness became an island of security for him in a very shaky world. He succeeded not because the system saved him; it did not. Teddy needed more than the system could deliver. He needed uncompromising, unapologetic love. He needed a role model after which he could pattern his life."

B—Now, though this story is fictional (I looked it up), it's moral is nevertheless true: when you and I learn to become humble servants for God – like Mrs. Thompson, like Mary, and (need I say) like Jesus – God can do remarkable things through us.

9. So friends, God's gift of His humble servant Mary can be teach US to become gifts of humble service for others, as well – that is our calling, and that is our task as Christians.
10. [PRAYER]
11. [CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. So, today's "gift" of the "Humble Servant" is really two-fold: (#1) It's a "gift" that *God* gave us in the form of an *example* of what humble servanthood should look like (modeled, of course, after Mary in this story); and (#2) the "gift" of the "Humble Servant" is also a reference to the service that *you and I* are called to give *back* to God = the fact that *WE* (like Mary) are also called to be humble servants for God, as well.
2. Author Deborah Smith Douglas tells the story about the midweek Eucharist service she attended at St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She says that one of the things she loved most was the hand-lettered sign that hangs over the only door into the sanctuary: "*SERVANT'S ENTRANCE*." She notes that there isn't any way in or out of that church except through the service door [Deborah Smith Douglas, cited d in "The Other Side" (May-June 1991), in the magazine Christianity Today, Vol. 35, no. 10]. This is the same "door" (service) through which all true Christians are to pass each and every day.
3. In fact, it's been said that "*Many Christians suffer from loneliness because they are sitting instead of serving*" [Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990)].
4. As was said of Mother Teresa at one point, "*When we are free to be nothing, then God can use us for anything*" (Michael Glazier, "Free to be Nothing," in magazine Christianity Today, Vol. 33, No. 10).
5. As Marion Soards explains, "*Mary serves as a role model of true faith, accepting God's will despite her lack of comprehension and even reservations in relation to the angelic message of God's saving work*" (Marion Soards, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B: Advent, p. 56).

6. Pastor and seminary president Maxie Dunnam once explained it this way, *“To be a Christian is to be... a servant. [Yet] there is a vast difference between the kind of serving most of us do and the willful decision to become a servant. The way most of us serve keeps us in control. We choose when, where, and whom we will serve. In that way, we stay in charge. But Jesus calls us to something else. He calls us to be servants. When we make this choice, we give up to the right to be in charge.*

If we serve as Jesus did, we become available to others and vulnerable. And paradoxically, in doing this we experience glorious freedom. We lose our fear of being stepped on, manipulated, or taken advantage of. We make the deliberate choice to become servants, to make ourselves available for God's purpose. Joy comes when we act out of being a servant, rather than out of the pride-producing choice to serve. More than anything, the world needs the servant-witness of people who have the mind of Christ.” [Maxie Dunnam, January-February 1981 Issue of the magazine Alive Now!].

7. Rev. John Thornburg once wrote a poem that reminds us of Mary’s influence on the life of her son:

*“Her son was heard to say, ‘Your faith has made you well’
when people sought him out because they felt the hell
of torment and despair.*

*From whom did that truth come if not from Mary’s voice,
When she rehearsed the tale of why she was the choice
to bear the promised One?*

*The courage in her ‘Yes’ was bold by any gauge.
She lived in poverty a pawn of Roman rage,
yet faith had made her strong.*

*What is our Christmas work if not to pause, and give
Our richest thanks to God for faith like hers, and ask*

for courage for our day? [John Thornburg’s poem “Your Faith Has Made You Well” (2004)]

8. It’s been said that *“God does not so much need people to do extraordinary things as He needs people who do ordinary things extraordinarily well”* [William Barclay (1907-1978), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#10137].

9. Fred Craddock, cited by Darryl Bell (Maple Grove, Minn.) in the magazine Leadership, Vol. 5, No. 4. As an example, founder of Methodism John Wesley once wrote that as servants of God, we Christians are to *“Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can”* [John Wesley (1703-1791), cited by Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#10126].

10. Heartwarming though it is, the tale of little Teddy Stoddard and his inspirational teacher, Mrs. Thompson, is a work of fiction. The original story, which first appeared in significantly different form in the magazine *Home Life* in 1976, was written by Elizabeth Silance Ballard (now Elizabeth Ungar) and called "Three Letters from Teddy." The main character's name was Teddy Stallard, not Teddy Stoddard. In 2001, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* columnist Dennis Roddy interviewed the author, who expressed amazement at how often and how freely her short story has been adapted, rarely with proper credit. *“I've had people use it in their books, except they made it as if it happened to them,”* she told Ruddy. Paul Harvey used it in a radio broadcast. Dr. Robert Schuller repeated it in a televised sermon. It has been passed from person to person as a "true story" on the Internet since 1998. Though it is loosely based on her personal experiences, Ungar insists the story is pure fiction.