

IT IS ALSO BLESSED TO RECEIVE

December 24, 2004

SBCC

Isaiah 63: 7-9 Luke 2: 1-20

The time has come, the waiting ends. Tonight is the night of wonder, of splendor, of deep peace. Preparations have ceased – or at least been abandoned. It's time to settle in to the mystery, to follow the star to Bethlehem, to join the crowd gathering around the manger.

Tonight is a night for gifts: gifts to be given and gifts received. Children won't sleep for wondering what their gifts will be. Parents eagerly anticipate their children's reactions to the gifts they've chosen. It's a mark of maturity, I think, to anticipate the joy that comes in giving gifts more than the joy that comes from getting gifts.

It is more blessed to give than to receive, but in our excitement and anticipation over giving we sometimes lose sight of the fact that it is also blessed to receive. Sometimes we don't know how to receive gifts.

I imagine most of you have had the experience of giving someone a gift and having them say, "Oh, you shouldn't have" or "Oh, you shouldn't have spent so much money on me." Deflating responses aren't they? They take the wind right out of your sails and the joy out of your giving. How about responses such as, "Oh, I don't deserve such a nice gift" Or "This gift is much too good for me to use. I'm going to save it for a special occasion." And you know that person will go to his or her grave never having used your gift.

There are different kinds of responses – ones that let you know immediately that you've goofed. The very first thing I made in our woodshop class up north was a trivet made with two pieces of wood and several dowels. I proudly sent it off to my sister-in-law for Christmas. The thank you note I got back said, "Thank you very much for the gift, but what is it? A mouse ladder perhaps? A downer my mother used to use was "Why did you get me this?" Then there are those, usually children, but not always, who misuse your gift and immediately break it.

Trying to give others the gift of help can be even worse. Some people assume that to accept help from another implies weakness on their part, and their pride is hurt if you offer to help them. Others assume that a gift – whether it is one that comes in a package or an offer of help cannot be freely given – must be paid back in kind, that to accept a gift obligates one in some way. Let me tell you about a lady who knew how to receive gifts. When my children were young, we lived right around the corner from their great grandmother. One of the children had dinner with her nearly every night of the week. It was a special time for each of the five kids to be the sole center of attention. Nay Nay as we called her, was a great lady, a woman of charm and a lover of beauty. She was a woman of considerable wealth with exquisite taste and much fine jewelry.

When my youngest son was six or seven, his school had a "Secret Santa Sale," a place where children could buy gifts to fit their budgets. Bobby came home from school one day in a

state of high excitement and euphoria. He had bought Nay Nay a huge “diamond” ring for ten cents. The chrome paint was already peeling off the sides.

On Christmas Eve, Bobby gave Nay Nay her diamond with bated breath and all the pride and love a seven year old could muster. And for months afterward, every time Bobby went to Nay Nay’s for dinner she had replaced her lovely expensive diamond ring with the ten cent diamond. When Nay Nay died four years later, the ten cent diamond lay at the top of her jewelry box. And Bob knew that he had given a good gift, that he had pleased the one he loved, and that she loved him.

Tonight is a night for gifts, gifts to be given and gifts received. Tonight God gives us a gift – a gift of a child, a tiny baby who is the very self of God. Tonight God gives us the gift of one who will love us as we’ve never been loved before, who will die for us, who will rise for us, who will reign in power for us, who will pray for us.

How will we receive this gift that God wants to give to us? Will we say, “Oh No God, you shouldn’t have?” Will we refuse to accept the gift because we think ourselves unworthy? Will we refuse to accept the gift for fear of the kind of obligations we think might be tied to it? Will we deprive God of the joy of giving freely to us?

Or will we take that baby into our arms, feel the warmth of him and the life of him, smell the smell of Mary’s milk on him, examine his fingernails and count his toes and say to God, “Thank you God, this baby is what I wanted most in the world and I will love him with my whole heart forever.

Tonight is a night for gifts; gifts to be given and gifts received. This night, let us receive our gifts with wonder and love and graciousness, and all the thanks we are capable of giving.