

Manchester United Methodist Church
December 24, 2011 - Rev. Greg Weeks
"To My Best Friend"

I asked a few weeks ago to share the best Christmas gift you ever received. I loved the variety of responses. Some revolved around *experiences*. The best Christmas gift for one person was returning from the Korean War, while for another it was receiving a break before possibly being deployed to Vietnam. For one it was being introduced to this church at Christmas time, and finding the gift of a special faith community.

Many responses revolved around favorite *gifts*, often given at great cost to the giver: a Chatty Cathy doll; a kid's sewing machine; an electronic organ; an electric train; a DVD of old family photos.

Christmas is a time when we receive beyond anything we've necessarily deserved. And in receiving, whether it's gifts of experiences or gifts of things, we are touched, moved, and changed by love.

Probably the rarest gift we could ever receive, and one of the most powerful, is when it comes from *someone we don't know too well*.

One person told of when she was a teenager and her family fell upon difficult times financially. Nuns from the Sisters of Mercy heard about their difficulty, and provided "the best Christmas we ever had." This person went on to say, **"To this day, I try to pass God's love to others because of what He did and what the nuns did because of their faith in Him."**

Yes it powerful and unforgettable when we receive a gift from someone we don't know too well.

The following is a drama performed during this portion of the service:

I grew up in a small town, and back then, each grade level in elementary school was divided up into a "smarter" class and a "slower" class. Nobody advertised that, of course, but it was pretty easy to figure it out. Most of the kids in the slower group were poor. And by the fourth grade, all the kids knew who belonged where. School was always pretty easy for me, so I was always in the smart group.

Well one day this girl named Marlene was transferred to the smarter class. I'll never forget her walking into our room that first day - looking painfully out of place, of course - her skirt hung down below her knees and looked like the moths had gotten into it...her sweater was patched... Everyone knew her. She was the kid who lived in a tar-paper shack off one of the back roads in the country. It was like something out of a movie, with rusted car parts

everywhere, and boards on the porch falling through. You just could hardly believe that real people lived like that who went to YOUR school.

I felt sorry for her. All the kids were whispering - loud enough for her to hear - saying things like "she's not sittin' next to ME!" - - until the teacher got after them. Of course everyone still teased her when the teacher wasn't looking. I never joined in - it made me mad, I mean, it's not like she could help it that her family was poor.

I thought about talking to Marlene during recess - she was always so alone - and of course nobody would play with her. But - recess times came and went - I'd go say "hi" as I walked by now and then, but I never did spend that much time with her.

Then came our class Christmas party. We'd always pass around a hat with the name of every kid on a piece of paper, and you'd have to buy a present for the person whose name you drew. It's supposed to be a big secret whose name you draw, but when Marlene drew her name, Buddy Carlisle leaned over her shoulder to see whose name she'd drawn, and shouted out "She drew Jenna's name!" Everyone laughed and pointed at me, and teased her until the teacher finally put a stop to it.

"I don't care!" I said... but to be honest, I did feel a little cheated. I wasn't exactly looking forward to the gift exchange like everyone else was, if you know what I mean.

Well, the Christmas party came, we all had refreshments, and everyone started opening their gifts. I dreaded opening up the little box neatly wrapped in tissue paper from Marlene. When I finally did, everyone crowded around to see what kind of gift it could be. Marlene was sitting off by herself. I wanted to protect her from the other kids somehow, and tried to hide it in my hands, but Mike kept shouting "What is it?" and I didn't want to seem ungrateful, so I just said "It's a wallet."

"Did your old man make that from the deer he shot?" Mike said. But Marlene seemed proud of it and just said "And my ma."

I looked over at Marlene and said "Thank you, Marlene" and we smiled at each other. I'll never forget that feeling. I realized that I hadn't really ever seen her smile before. Can you imagine? I felt all warm inside, like when you drink hot apple cider on a cold snowy night. As I rode the bus home from school and looked at that homemade wallet, I thought maybe in the spring I'd ride my bike over to her house someday just to talk or hang out.

I remember trying not to think about the kind of Christmas Marlene was going to have. I mean, what kind of presents would SHE be getting?

Well, I grew older, and even had Marlene in some other classes along the way, but I never did get around to riding my bike over to her house.

I went off to college, and it was the oddest thing how I'd think about Marlene every once in a while - usually when I'd struggle with a math problem - She used to just breeze through those like it was nothing...it was so odd, seeing this girl with absolutely nothing, but with so much potential.

I heard she dropped out of school to help her mother with the younger kids, then married young and started having babies of her own....seems like she just never had a fair shot in life.

I got married too and moved away. One day I was back home sorting through boxes full of stuff we'd saved from grade school, and I came across this deerskin wallet. Out of all the Christmas presents I'd gotten over the years, it was this little wallet that I somehow ended up holding onto.

I remember looking at the hand-stitching in the wallet that day and suddenly seeing this slit in the side that I'd never noticed before. I opened it up and pulled out a little piece of paper - and scrawled in fourth grade handwriting were these 4 words: "To my best friend."

Those words just - pierced my heart. I was her best friend? I remembered that smile that day - how that felt. I wish I could go back - and have the courage to be the kind of friend I had wanted to be. I understood way too late, the love that had been wrapped up inside this little wallet.

And now, every Christmas, when we get out our decorations, this wallet is among them. My son has heard the story of this wallet since he was two, and when he was about four or five years old, he said "Mama, of all the gifts - that was the goodest gift, wasn't it?"

Yes. It was.

On this sacred evening, when we look at this manger scene, we're looking at God's deerskin wallet.

Every Christmas we see a variety of manger scenes, don't we? And usually we make them real pretty and real sanitized. Actually, because we've seen so many manger scenes, and because we've made them so quaint, we forget that a manger was not where a child should be born. A manger, a stable, was for livestock, not humans. There was no soft padding for a baby—only rags to bundle him in, and prickly straw to lay him on. There was no aroma of baked bread in the kitchen—there was only the unmistakable smell of the barnyard.

To a casual observer, back in Jesus' day, the manger is Marlene's tar paper shack, down the dirt road in the back hills. The child born there is the child the cool people ignore. The child who is left out of conversations. The child who isn't invited to parties. The child other kids laugh at behind his back.

Yet God chooses to come to us this way. For when we've gone after what's cool, and when we have experienced the painful shallowness of what popularly passes for life, we understand God's wisdom.

From the manger comes the Child who will be faithful to you, when all your other, "cool," friends have better things to do than hang out with you. From the manger comes the Child who gives you what you really need to live: understanding, compassion, forgiveness.

The manger is God's wallet offered to you with the note, "To my best friend."

This evening, feel the warmth that Jenna felt when she opened that deer skin gift, and found that hidden message. Be profoundly grateful that God loves you so much that he chose to be born this way, so he could be born again in your heart. "The Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth. [And] to all who received him...he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:14,12)

May this scene warm your heart. And may you know that tonight, this very night, you HAVE received the "goodest gift," EVER.

*For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old.
When with, the ever circling years, shall come the time foretold...
When all, who rush and worry here—shall see their labor end:
And glimpse our God point to His child and say, "To my best friend."*

(adapted from "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," by Edmund Sears)