

“The Gift That Keeps on Giving.”

When I was a child, Christmas was a time of great anticipation. And things would start getting “amped up” around the first of December, when my parents told us it was time to start working on our Christmas wish lists. Though we were by no means a wealthy family, I don’t recall my parents ever stressing the importance of self-restraint or moderation in our wish lists, and that was just fine by me.

I have no idea what my siblings did, but, for me, the process of creating my wish-list was almost like an annual rite of passage. I would sit at our dining table, with plenty of paper and pencils near at hand. Slowly and methodically, I would study each page of what was, for me, then, holy writ – the *Sears Christmas Catalogue* – looking for just the right things.

When I was done, you really couldn’t call what I had produced merely a wish *list*, for it was far too long. And when I gave the finished product to my parents, I would think, “This year, Christmas is going to be amazing! But, as it usually turned out, that year was pretty much like most years: I received plenty of good stuff, but frequently it wasn’t everything I expected.

And so, in some years, the excitement and anticipation of Christmas would give way to disappointment. But I mention this, not to garner your sympathy, but only so you’ll understand why, given today’s gospel reading, why I feel I can say to John the Baptist, “Brother, I feel your pain.” Let me explain.

Our gospel reading begins thus:

“When John [the Baptist] heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

Now, when I sat down to begin preparing for this sermon, and I read these words, the first thing that came to my mind was, “Is he serious? Is he honestly wondering if Jesus is really the Messiah?”

I mean, think about it. Three of the gospels tell us that John said, of Jesus,

“He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

In one gospel, when Jesus comes forward to be baptized by John, John said to Jesus, “I should be baptized by you!” In another gospel, when John was asked about his relationship with Jesus, he said, “He must increase, and I must decrease.” And, finally, two of the gospels tell us that, right after the baptism of Jesus by John, the audible voice of God comes from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased.”

So, it seems to me, after all that, there should be no doubt in John’s mind about Jesus. And yet, in our gospel reading this morning, he sounds uncertain. Is this really the same John whom Jesus described as,

“Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

Is this the same man? If so, what’s going on? Has John changed his mind? Does he no longer believe in Jesus? Well, let’s see.

When our gospel reading begins, John the Baptist is in prison because he had the audacity to publicly criticize the marriage of King Herod to his brother’s ex-wife — something not allowed in the Old Testament. But that’s the kind of guy John was; and he was a bold and fiery preacher: “Turn or burn! Tithe or die!” But here’s the thing: I think John expected Jesus to be just like him.

But the things John has been hearing about Jesus, aren’t the things he’s been expecting from Jesus. And so, John sends his disciples to ask the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

And the answer Jesus offers is simple:

“Tell John what you see and hear: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

That’s an impressive resume, but it wasn’t what John wanted to hear. But what’s really interesting is that, in his answer, Jesus has just referenced an Old

Testament prophecy about what would happen when the Messiah appeared ... and it's those very things that Jesus has been doing.

We never learn what John's reaction is, but it's easy for me to imagine that he was disappointed. ("Brother, I feel your pain!") But maybe he wasn't disappointed. I say that because there's something in the way that John phrased his question to Jesus that gives us a clue about what was going on in John's mind.

To be sure, the way the question is posed in our gospel reading makes it sound like John is asking Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, or not?" However, in the original Greek of this text, it seems like John is asking a slightly different question. According to some scholars, a more accurate rendering of John's question is possible, and that it looks something like this:

"Are you the One Who Is To Come, or are we to wait for
a different kind of One Who Is To Come?"

In other words, John isn't asking, "Are you the Messiah, or not?" Rather, John is asking, "Are you the sort of Messiah that I've been expecting? Or are you a different kind of Messiah?" This is the clue that tells us that John seems to be open to the possibility of a new understanding of who Jesus is, and what Jesus is about. In fact, John may be signaling that he's willing to change what he believes.

And that, my friends, may be the challenge that our gospel reading is laying at our feet. It's asking us, "Do we have an open mind about the things we believe? And are we willing to change what we believe, if new information comes to light?" Think about that for a moment: How open is my mind?

If all this makes you feel uncomfortable, I'm not surprised because change can be very hard. Peggy and I were reminded just how hard change can be, when, several years ago, we suggested to our girls that we change how we do Christmas that year. In our minds, it would be less about presents, and more about spending some quality-time together as a family. I wish I could tell you that the idea was enthusiastically embraced; it wasn't, but, you know how it is, negotiations are always ongoing.

Yes, change is hard, but harder still is getting people to change what they believe *about God*. But that's what Jesus is asking of John: "You expected me to be something I'm not, John. You believed that I would be doing and saying vastly different things. But let me ask you this: Can you accept who I really am?"

Over the centuries, people have tried to define God and, at times, they thought they had. But then, some new information would come to light, or some ancient manuscript would be unearthed, and some of the things we thought we knew about God had to be thrown out. But, truth be told, that's how God is: he always manages to squirm out of our grasp; and he constantly resists our best efforts to put him into a comfortable, and predictable, pigeonhole. And when that happens, we're surprised, and maybe even disappointed, with God. But the question this morning's gospel reading keeps on asking us is this: "When that happens — not if, but when — when that happens, what are you going to do about it?"

Now, if all this is sounding like bad news to you, here's some good news: It's the third Sunday in Advent, and Christmas is just around the corner! Now, maybe you're crafting your very own Christmas wish list. (If you are, I have some suggestions.) But it's just as likely that you're in the process of creating a shopping list of things to buy for the people you love. If so, please allow me to offer a suggestion. But before I do that, a brief explanation is in order.

You see, Christmas, as wonderful as it is, was never meant to stand alone. For the story of Christmas is merely the first chapter in a much longer book whose last chapter is the story of Easter. And in between those two chapters, are many other chapters filled with many other stories. But I believe the sole purpose of all of those stories is to describe for us the full measure of God's love for us.

Sometimes, the things described in those stories sound too fantastic, or even unbelievable. But when we're tempted to doubt what we read, God whispers in our ear: "Don't worry, because the *What* that's being described in these stories is not nearly as important as the *Why* that's behind them." In other words, the message is more important than the medium. And that very message is what I'd like to suggest you offer as a gift, to those whom you love, on Christmas.

So, tell your children, tell your spouse, tell your siblings, and your parents, and your friends — tell them all — this:

God loves them just as they are. Tell them that God has always loved them, and that God will always love them. And tell them that the greatest person in the universe thinks they're the greatest person in the universe. Period!

I remember once seeing an elderly woman wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with these words:

“Since God couldn’t be everywhere, he gave us grandmothers.”

At the time, I thought the slogan a bit too gratuitous, not to mention that was lousy theology. But now, I’m amazed at how true it is.

You see, unlike John at the baptism of Jesus, most of us will never hear the audible voice of God. That’s why God needs us. That’s why God uses each and every one of us, to tell each and every other one of us, about how God truly feels about us: That he love us just as we are. That there’s nothing we need to do to make God love us any more; neither is there anything we can do to make God love us any less. And, that God’s love is unconditional, universal, and eternal.

Now, if you make that your Christmas gift to those whom you love, be forewarned: That may not be what they expected. That may not even be what they wanted, and they may be disappointed. But I will make you this guarantee: One day, they will look back and realize that it was the one gift they most needed, for time and experience will have proven that it truly was the only gift that actually kept on giving.

Amen.