

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, December 18, 2016, 11:15 a.m.
The Rev. Elizabeth Keeler

In the spirit of preparation, I've been trying to be more observant this Advent. Where do we put our time and our energy in this important season? What do we mostly focus on, what do we believe gives the season meaning? Well, I haven't had to look far, or talk with too many people, to realize that the notion of giving occupies much of our attention during Advent and Christmas. As I wrestled with precisely what this preoccupation with giving might mean I came across a wonderful reflection by Will Willimon. Willimon, as many of you know, is a contemporary American theologian and Methodist Bishop who teaches at Duke Divinity School. This morning I offer you both my thoughts and Willimon's on how we might consider our fixation on giving as we prepare to receive a gift as precious as the one God offers to us at Christmas.

Realistically it's hard to separate our notions of giving from Advent and Christmas. We generously give presents to family and friends and often go to great lengths choosing, wrapping and delivering these special gifts. Santa Claus brings presents, children give to their teachers, bosses give bonuses, the Salvation Army's bell and kettle enable us to be generous even when we are buying groceries. Christmas is the season all about giving! And nothing about this is necessarily wrong of course. After all, didn't Jesus say that it is better to give than to receive? I would suggest that we "enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically benevolent giving people. That's one of the reasons why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is the season to celebrate our generosity."

Willimon offers: "We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives at Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges.

Charles Dickens' story of Scrooge's transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke's story of the manager. Whereas Luke tells the story of God's gift *to us*, Dickens tells how we can give *to others*. Indeed, a Christmas Carol is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves and we can't resist being drawn to Dickens suggestion that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

And if we're being honest, many of us might also admit that we are simply much better at giving than getting - more comfortable in the offering realm, but I suspect not necessarily always because we are purely generous people. The root of our generosity I suspect stems from our desire to see ourselves as self-sufficient, independent, and in control.

This morning is a good time to remember that the Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – has little to do with how blessed it is to be givers and everything to do with how essential it is to recognize ourselves as receivers. And in Advent, much of our efforts should be about preparing ourselves to be recipients of a gift that we are desperately in need of.

In most cases however we would prefer to think of ourselves as the givers – self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to use some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit others or the less fortunate. Which is, again, in direct contradiction to the

biblical account of the first Christmas. There we, that is all humanity, are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were, or like to see ourselves as, but as the receivers we really are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we – with all of our power, generosity, competence, capabilities – have little to do with God’s work in Jesus.

God wants to do something for us so astounding, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God resorts to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to accomplish God’s gift. We didn’t invent, or approve, or purchase the incarnation. We have nothing to offer. At Bethlehem, then and today, all we do is receive the gift.”

Perhaps the most basic fundamental truth we can glean from the nativity account, the authentic Christmas story, is simply this: we are receivers before we can ever become givers. Accepting God’s generous and precious gift, the incarnation, means acknowledging our very lives, our very breath, as gift. This can be difficult especially for those of us who would rather see ourselves as givers. Being on the receiving end of love, God’s or anyone else’s, can be uncomfortable tough going. But one of the ways God loves us is with gifts we do not think we need or deserve, gifts that can transform us into people we never imagined we could be. But even so, the people God longs for and creates us to be.

And so brothers and sister, as wonderful and empowering as it is to be givers, Advent and Christmas are important seasons for us to remember to be receivers also. Grateful, humble, empty-handed recipients of a “gracious God who, rather than leaving us to our own devices, gives us the gift of a baby.” Amen.