

December 25, 2016 Christmas Day
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Lessons and Carols

Good Gifting

Christmas: a time of gifts, of giving and receiving gifts. Maybe in years past, or in the past weeks, or last night, or just this morning you received a gift that you absolutely loved—or absolutely didn't. Or maybe you gave someone a gift they really wanted—or really didn't. In fact, many of our ideas and practices about giving and receiving are a bit off, according to social scientists. Their findings can be surprising.

For example: a problematic phenomena known as over-individuating. This is when a giver wants to find just that unique gift, that special something for that special someone. Over-individuating declares: "No giving of the same gift to different people." Not necessary, researchers say. Often more likely to miss the mark. That's because when you over-individuate, when you give someone something that is truly one of a kind, it's might not be something they would actually like, or could actually use. Over-individuating discounts the fact that people are perfectly happy with a good gift, even if it's also something that is given to all kinds of other people, too. A good gift is something someone wants or needs.

A related finding: that the amount of time and effort that goes into a gift has an effect on the recipient's appreciation. Or to put it as the saying puts it: it's the thought that counts. Not so, research says, at least, not to the recipient. The thought doesn't really matter to the recipient. As shown in a series of experiments that were done right here in Chicago at the Museum of Science and Industry, people appreciated randomly selected gifts as much as carefully chosen ones, and it didn't matter if the gift came from a stranger or from someone who knew them well, as long as the gift was satisfying. Again, as long as it was a good gift, the thought behind it didn't count for the recipient—especially because they are often unaware of the thought. But the thought did count, the researchers found, the thought does have an effect, on the giver. All that time and effort, all that thinking about the recipient, makes the giver appreciate, feel closer to, value, love the recipient all that much more.

And then there's re-gifting. People assume that givers would be offended if they heard their gift has been given again to someone else. Studies show most aren't. Givers are even happy that something they gave to someone is good for someone else.

It strikes me that these findings are actually not that surprising. It strikes me that they are especially not that surprising to God. Of course, God knows everything and so knows all of this, but more than that, God perfectly expresses all of this at Christmas.

Take over-individuating. Though God has made each one of us unique individuals, distinct people with varieties of gifts, at Christmas, God does not over-individuate. The very opposite. At Christmas, in Christmas, God gives the same gift to everyone. The Savior's birth is good news of great joy for all people, as the angels proclaimed. As we proclaim this Sunday, and as we proclaim every Sunday, what God gives is perfectly, generously, indiscriminately given to all. What God gives are the very things we want and need: love, forgiveness, peace, joy. We proclaim this day, and all days, that God's very self is given to us: in the manger and in the meal, in a person and in an ongoing presence, in the power of the Spirit. God gives this to each and every one of us.

Consider, too, how the thought counts with God. God puts a lot of time and effort into the giving of Godself. The prophets describe it, all the time, all that time, the promise made, long, long ago. Jesus embodies it, the effort of his life and death. It's all been there from the beginning, as John chapter one says, when in the beginning God was there, and the Word, too. The Word was with God from the beginning, light coming into being. All of life coming into being through him, through the one who became flesh among us. God's giving has been on God's mind since the very beginning. Giving is God's nature, gloriously manifest on the day when God became flesh and dwelt among us—though we didn't know him, or receive him, as John 1 also says. His own did not accept him; appreciate him. The thought counts, not to us, but to God. How much the thought of us means to God! Since the beginning of time God has been thinking of us, loving us, valuing us all the more.

And then there's re-gifting. God is absolutely not offended by re-gifting. It's what God wants us to do. It's all we can do. We cannot truly appreciate what God does, but we can receive it, and give it to others. The love, forgiveness, peace, and joy that God gives us, we can give to others. It's what they want and need, too.

We can give these gifts to family members and to strangers, we can give these very same gifts to everyone, we can give them with careful thought and randomly, too, we can give these gifts and find ourselves more loving, and forgiving, more peaceful, and joyful. We can give these Godly gifts, and find ourselves receiving them, all the more.