

1 Sermon, December 2, 2012

Texts: Matthew 25:41-46, 1 John 3:14, 16-18

Title: "Jesus' Wish List"

1. What would Jesus want for Christmas?
2. Jesus doesn't want you to help anyone
3. Helping is just another thing added on top
4. Helping separates you from the ones you help
5. Jesus wants you transformed along with the world

1. What would Jesus want for Christmas?

A few days ago, I asked a question of my fellow actors/actresses at the Redbud play. I asked, "What do you think Jesus would want for Christmas?"

Well, several people said, "Peace on Earth, which may be the most obvious answer.

An answer that surprised me for the question of what Jesus would want for Christmas was – a vacation! Jesus would want a vacation from all the demands people place on him.

Another person asked me a question back: "What do you get for the guy who has everything?"

But then, does Jesus really have everything?
Does Jesus have everything he wants?

I bet you can think of a few things Jesus doesn't have – like peace on earth.

Jesus brought a lot of good news to earth, but a lot of people aren't paying attention. So there's a lot of stuff that Jesus could wish for.

2. Jesus doesn't want you to help anyone

Well, let me tell you one thing that Jesus doesn't want. And it may sound totally wrong at first.

Jesus doesn't want you to help people.

You probably know the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Well, it's not quite accurate, because they were only counting the men, not the women and children. So it would probably be more like the feeding of the 20,000 – a crowd much like one of those open-air rock concerts.

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The story goes that Jesus wanted to go to a quiet place to rest up, but the crowds followed him. He took a boat, but they came over land, until there was a huge crowd. It was getting to meal time, and the crowds just weren't going away, so the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Should we send away the crowds so they can get something to eat?"

I think the disciples really wanted to give Jesus some rest by sending the crowds away.

But Jesus surprised everyone by saying, "You give them something to eat."

It was a difficult command to follow. The disciples didn't have that much food. So they begged the crowd to give them some food to share, and the crowd was not very generous.

It was a transformational moment – but just think for a moment. If the disciples had had a big pile of bread and fish to give away, would it have been a transformational moment?

Hey, I've got this big pile of fish and bread, come get it! Line up. I've got it. You don't. Here, let me be generous!

The transformation occurred in part because the disciples were not in control. They humbled themselves enough to ask the crowd for food. Only then could they really experience the grace of God.

3. Helping is just another thing added on top

You see, we tend to look at "Helping others" as something added on top of the rest of our busy lives.

I don't know about you, but I don't need one more thing to do.

We've each of us already got a lot of things we think we're supposed to do. And we've got other things we want to do.

But that's not how Jesus put it. In the allegory on the last judgment in Matthew 25, the ones who clothed the naked, fed the hungry and cared for the sick who are welcomed to sit by God.

It wasn't the ones who just added something to their busy schedule. It's the ones who entered into relationship with those who had needs who were rewarded.

The allegory on the last judgment doesn't say that those who got to sit by God did it all by themselves. "I'm helping people." On the

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contrary, the sheep are in it together. They function as a group. They are merciful – and they are merciful together.

So the caring that Jesus talked about was a mutual caring, and it's only the ones who don't want to participate in the mutual caring who are condemned. It's more of a way of life than just a thing added on top of a busy schedule.

When Jesus said, "You give them something to eat," it was a plural "you."

4. Helping separates you from the ones you help

You see, when we "Help people," it often means we are separating ourselves a little bit from the ones we help. It doesn't have to separate us, but it often does.

Just think about the usual way a soup kitchen works. The servers are on one side of the counter, the patrons on the other.

At Luke House, everyone sits together. You can't separate yourself so easily. It really becomes sharing instead of helping.

5. Helping leaves you in control and unchanged

We teach children to help people, and that's a good thing.

But as adults, as Christians, we may want to unlearn that a little. Oh, we should still be kind and generous and loving.

But "helping" means that we are in control of the helping. We are unchanged, dispensing our time and energy.

But the scripture tells us that God wants transformation.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:2, RSV.

If God wants transformation, then Jesus' wish list should include not only the transformation of the world around us, but ourselves as well.

There's probably one thing in your life that you can change right now that will make you reflect more clearly the love of God, and that will lead toward that change of mercy and justice in the world.

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Each of us has a little change we could make that would give a little gift to Jesus. And that change is different for each of us.

Maybe for you it's forgiveness – that there's someone who you need to forgive, to let go of the bitterness inside you toward that person. If you forgive that person, it will make Jesus a little happier.

Maybe for you it's giving up your pride and admitting your weakness. You can't let God into your life unless you get rid of some of your own will.

Maybe for you it's paying attention to the cause of a particular group of people – victims of human trafficking, homeless children, or prisoners.

Maybe for you it is learning to speak up for God's love in the world.

Ask God what it is that you could change about yourself that would really be a gift.

There are undoubtedly some barriers to the change. There's fear. Fear of doing something different, fear of not being able to sustain the effort, fear of failure, fear of being hurt, fear of embarrassment.

Sometimes the barriers are other people. If you want to give a gift to Jesus -- a gift of a change in yourself -- there may be someone who doesn't want you to change.

The reading from 1 John goes even further. It urges us to "lay down our lives" for one another. That's what abiding in God's love is about.

That's not just adding something on top. That's real transformation. That's real love and relationship.

So, what does Jesus want for Christmas?

Jesus wants something from you. Jesus wants not just something added on to your busy schedule, but a change in you that will bless those in need.

If we're able to do that – to work together, forget ourselves, lower barriers, forgive and love, well, that's the kind of gift that I think Jesus wants for Christmas.

Amen.

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"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death." "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." 1 John 3:14, 16-18, NRSV.

"Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" Matthew 25:41-46, NRSV.