

December 30, 2018

John 14:11-17

John 15:20-27

John 16:12-15

John 20:19-23

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

Here we are on the doorstep of a new year. A lot of it is looking pretty ominous to some of the people I know. I think *all* the years look ominous, to anyone willing to worry. It certainly seemed scary the year Eve persuaded Adam to take a bite out of that apple. And when it started to rain after we were so derisive about Noah spending time building the Ark, that was pretty scary. I come from a long tradition of people claiming that “He is coming soon,” and by that most of them mean that the world will end as we know it and people like me will get thrown into Hell.

I still remember how all the kids in the youth group I led as a young Pastor stopped paying any attention to their teachers at school. It was clear and obvious, they said, that they would never live long enough to grow up; we would all be destroyed in a nuclear war. And people who knew what was going on are still amazed that it did not happen. The Cuban Missile Crisis was in October 1962, but the agreements between Kennedy and Khrushchev did not set everything at ease. The arms race heated up again, and ten years later (February 1971) when a radio operator played the wrong tape on the national Emergency Broadcast System and it took forty minutes before the nationwide alarm was called off, that tipped the scales for the high school kids I was working with. They were convinced the world would never be safe again; it was just a matter of time. It was silly to go on pretending they would ever see adulthood, so why keep doing their schoolwork?

Our church youth group made a huge difference for many of them. We had a place to talk, to face our fears, to remember that whatever happened, we still cared about each other. We started talking about “Get caught being faithful.” We cannot control the world, but we can still make choices for our own lives for as long as we are alive. Most of those kids went back to work and ended up doing better in school than ever. I am still really proud of them. Of course, they are at retirement age now, so maybe they are getting ready to stop trying for the second time. Life is funny, and “people are funnier than anybody,” my old New England friend Frank Weiskel used to say.

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

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We certainly have more than a few catastrophes to worry about today, if we choose to do so. They are not just our imagination. We could each die, or we could all die in one of six major scenarios that all of us are familiar with (nuclear war, global warming, asteroid collision, starvation, great depression, terrorist attack). That does not count the little and more likely threats of individual calamity: auto accident, crazy gunman, dread disease, falling off a ladder, or slipping in the shower.

When I was a Pastor on Mercer Island, two small airplanes collided in the sky above the parsonage. One of them crashed in our back yard, the other a few blocks away. Everyone in those planes was killed. I was not home and did not get hurt, but that was just an accident of a different color. Earlier that year a motorist was killed driving to work through the tunnel on I-90 going into Seattle. Water had accumulated in the air vent above one of the lanes of the tunnel. When temperatures rose, this huge chunk of ice suddenly dropped right in front of the windshield of one of the cars, and the driver was killed instantly. She was not careless. She never had a chance.

We live in a temporal world. It has always been this way. We used to be at the center of our solar system, and God set it up that way and would protect us. "World without end, Amen." But we have known better for a long time now, so back to the fallback position of that high school youth group: Get caught being faithful. We never know what a day will bring, and we cannot control the world around us. But we *can* make choices – we can live and decide and use our lives according to the opportunities we are given – for as long as life and breath are given to us. Is this a surprise to anybody? Happy New Year.

Only, it is not nearly as bleak or as frightening as we sometimes make it sound. The Messiah has come. The Resurrected Jesus is still with us – if we pay attention and allow it. And life, despite all of its trials and despite its physical ending, is still beautiful and full of hope and meaning. And LIFE goes on into eternal life.

So we pay more and more attention to the spiritual realms and to the spiritual life that we have been invited into. Hopefully this does not cause us to neglect the responsibilities we have in this temporal world. Jesus was certainly very engaged in the life going on around Him, but He also showed us a lifestyle that was very aware of the spiritual realms around Him and that trusted in the value and importance of

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

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the world to come. So He spent far more time than most humans do “in the wilderness” – in prayer, in time with God. And He seems to have patterned His life by the perspectives and the choices He made in the presence of the Spirit. He was not a recluse. He did not live in the desert or in a monastery away from the normal tensions and problems of the world around Him. That is something I think we should pay attention to. But clearly Jesus’ prayer life had shaped and formed an unbreakable love-bond between Himself and God.

Jesus was the quintessential “man of prayer.” It looks and feels like He made His choices in prayer and regularly checked His direction and His purposes with the Spirit, to make sure He was not straying from His purpose or from His instructions. That is, of course, my understanding of what it means to “follow Jesus.” Not to copy or try to imitate what He did, but to adopt His pattern of prayerful obedience and apply it daily to our own lives.

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I told you that I would be paying attention to the passages in the TNC Bible that tell us about the Holy Spirit – the passages that confirm and even tell us more about living life with the Spirit. I hope you have noticed that I have been doing that. All the Scripture readings during Advent have been talking about the Holy Spirit. I have been doing that and, with consternation in some quarters, telling you about the True Christmas. It’s a thing difficult to do without mentioning the false Christmas. It is not about a virgin or a physical birth. It is about baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. It was for Jesus, and it is for us. But perhaps at last we are past the false Christmas for another year, and we can get on with it. By the way, I have started writing a “Pageant” for the True Christmas. Should have done so years ago. If you know how to write the script for a play, you could help. Let me know and I will send you my notes.

Today we are looking at four brief passages from the Gospel of John, and indeed I am embarrassed to be skipping over so much. But they each tell us something about life with the Holy Spirit, and I thought you might be interested.

### JOHN 14

In the fourteenth chapter of John, the categorical difference between us and Jesus is erased. That is astounding. I do not even like it. My reverence, respect, and awe for Jesus and the WAY He lived keeps making me want to put Him in a different category – a different layer or definition of “human” from me and the other people I know. Of course, if I understand the Incarnation, that’s not okay. But frequently I do not understand the Incarnation, and often I feel great sympathy for Catholics (and others) who want to believe that Jesus is divine in a way that us normal humans are not.

Yet Jesus Himself will not let us get away with it. Jesus Himself shoots that down. I am convinced that Jesus was constantly calling us into the LIFE that *He* was living. Sometimes He did amazing things, but always He called us to do them too. We try to interpret some of these stories in a way that breaks this principle, but I suspect we have doctored up such stories. Like the feeding of the five thousand: Jesus was teaching us to share with each other, but many of us want to insist that He was pulling food out of thin air. Not only does that ruin the story, but if that is what Jesus was doing, why didn’t He feed all the hungry people all the time? You and I cannot pull food out of thin air. If that’s what the story is about, it is meaningless to us. It has nothing to do with how we can live. We have to work and sweat and strive, like the story in Genesis says. But in the kind of love Jesus was demonstrating, we *can* learn to share.

Here in John 14: “[W]hoever has faith in me will do what I am doing; indeed he will do greater things still because I am going to the Father.” There goes a whole carload of excuses. Jesus expects us to be doing what He is doing. I assume that includes reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, proclaiming the Gospel. And what about some of Jesus’ passion and anger and uncompromising loyalty to God’s Kingdom? More of that in the next chapter.

So, in the wilderness temptations, which most people rush past in a few minutes, Jesus was encountering temptations that are classic to all humans. But we have understood little of His life, or of ours, until we know these temptations as clearly as He did and turn away from them in the same way that He did.

Yet if this is true and we really are supposed to live the kind of life that Jesus lived, then we will need the same kind of help from God that He counted on. “*If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.*”

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

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That has puzzled most of us quite a bit from time to time. We have all asked things – made some requests – that seem not to have been granted. To quibble, the story is not over yet; maybe all the things we have requested will be granted in due time. But I suspect the real issue is about asking IN HIS NAME. To ask in His name implies that our true requests are immersed in the same intentions and purposes that Jesus lived by. A true name is the pure essence of the person it represents. JOSHUA *means* “Yahweh is salvation.” JESUS means the same thing, for it is the same name translated from Hebrew into Greek.

In the Book of Revelation, it is said that Jesus has an even deeper and truer name. “*Written on him was a name known to none but himself ...*” (Revelation 19:12) In any case, I often suspect that we should spend more time wondering if our requests are truly honoring His name – His real purpose, His actual life. I wonder how often Jesus shakes His head sadly and says in words we cannot hear: “If I fulfilled this request, it would undo some of the very things I lived and died and was raised again to accomplish. Try to get on the same wavelength, and then see how much I can do for you.”

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I hope most of us love the fourteenth chapter for the promises it makes about the Holy Spirit. “*I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you. In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live, you too will live.*” Of course, this is the section in John’s Gospel that shocks us by its clear promises that the Holy Spirit will take over for Jesus after He has been killed. How has this become muted for so many Christians? How does it get muted for me? The true purposes and promises of the Christian Faith are proclaimed here in language difficult to miss, even if we do hear it translated from Greek into English. The true church is made up of groups of followers who, to the best of their ability, pattern every decision, every effort, and every purpose according to the guidance they are receiving from the Holy Spirit. So Jesus’ life and purpose continue to infuse and inspire them and us. Oh yes, I make it sound too certain and too perfect. But if we have a hard time seeing most churches in this light, is that not at least partly because many of them have no such clear intention in the first place?

### JOHN 15

The fifteenth chapter, it seems to me, is full of warnings about the difficulties of this New Life. It should be glorious and joyful to be following the Holy Spirit of Jesus in this WAY. But it will be fraught with peril, all the way from our own blunders to the increasing opposition of the world around us. How can such a grand and beautiful Message meet with such anger and hatred and opposition in our world? Of course, that's the story of Jesus in a nutshell. So we are reminded: if we are true followers, much of the world around us will greet our lives and our efforts with approximately the same responses that Jesus encountered. So never get careless. Never get caught off guard. Never be surprised. "*A servant is not greater than his master.*"

If you have serious doubts about this principle, check your own experience. How has your life been going, especially in the times when you were being most faithful? Please, it is not all black or white. Some of Jesus' people, and even faithful people from other traditions, will gather around when we are doing what the Spirit is asking of us. But there will always be the others. Some of them do not even see or acknowledge the damage they are doing. They are so deep in denial that their reasons and intentions are hidden away even from their own eyes. My mother used to say, "The self-deceived have no need to lie." Yes, well the self-deceived have no need to repent, to be sorry, or to experience a change of heart either.

### JOHN 16

There is always more to come and more to be revealed. I say it too quickly. Will that make it any harder to remember? Jesus (alias the Holy Spirit) is careful with our learning curve. Some people call it "patience." Jesus is a Master of Patience. And our tendency is to claim that we are ready for anything – bring it on. But Jesus knows better. We are easily overwhelmed with spiritual truth. And we are easily overwhelmed with all the possibilities there are for us to be faithful. So the Holy Spirit times things far beyond our best awareness. And the Holy Spirit is careful not to ask more of us than our present circumstances can sustain. Be grateful! Every time you get a respite, take it. Every chance you get to back off, renew your prayers, get a little perspective, take it. You do not have to worry about the opportunities all drying up and blowing away. That is Satan's whisper – the old used-car salesman's trick. Never volunteer. Never go looking for more challenges. The Spirit will make your assignments clear to

you just as soon as you are ready and they are appropriate. Frequently it feels to us like the Spirit is a step ahead and we do not feel quite ready yet, when the assignment has already come.

### JOHN 20

I wonder how many of you have pondered this passage in the twentieth chapter of John. It is the “little Pentecost.” It is the Great Commission, in miniature form. It is the most joyful moment in the lives of the disciples that we ever hear about. It is Easter day in John’s Gospel. The man they have believed in, the man they have changed their lives to follow, has been crucified – unbelievably executed as a common criminal in the cruelest manner the Romans could devise. They never expect to see Him again. They do not know what they will do with their own lives now that He is gone. And each of them, in their own way, has come to love Him. Imagine the wonder and the joy it must have been for them when Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. He had told them that He would be resurrected, but that never sunk in for them, any more than it sunk in that He would be killed. It is the most joyful moment in the lives of the disciples that we ever hear about. It is an incredibly joyful moment in each of *our* lives when we finally come to realize that the Holy Spirit is really alive and really with us. That changes everything for us, just like this Easter evening changed everything for them.

Let us assume that we *do* hear it and that we have received the Holy Spirit. We are not talking about speaking in tongues, though that should be fine with us if the Spirit directs it. We have received the Holy Spirit as the guide and guardian of our lives. We are eager for the assignments and the teachings that the Holy Spirit brings to us. Never mind all our former plans or hopes or purposes. Finally we have a real Leader, and One who knows what He is doing – and One who loves us beyond all our words to tell it.

But then this major teaser: *“If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.”*

The church has never handled this pronouncement very well. Most liberal churches will not touch it with a ten-foot pole, as we say. Does the community of the faithful – the bands of followers scattered here and there on the earth – have a practice and a purpose this far beyond what we have imagined or expected? Do we literally have the power to carry the forgiveness of God to others? And do we ever tell

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

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them so? Those are fair questions. Take them seriously. Make a list of the people you have told, point-blank and without equivocation and to their face: “I want you to know that in the name and power of Jesus the Christ, you are forgiven. He has granted me the authority to tell you that your sins are forgiven.”

When Jesus told people they were forgiven, it was usually accompanied by some kind of healing miracle. How can any of us be forgiven and not be healed? Is our sin and our participation in this broken world so small a matter that it does not really matter? Can you be forgiven and not feel your heart lifted and your soul renewed? What happens to your body when your soul is renewed in the love and grace of God?

However little we may have contemplated some of the incredible and joyful Message of this chapter, we have been even more reticent about the other half of this declaration: “*If you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.*”

Both sides of this coin require huge authority – an authority that comes from the Holy Spirit, to be sure, but authority nonetheless. It should stagger us to contemplate that we can actually pronounce sins forgiven. Yet it staggers us even more to think that we might need to tell some people that they are *not* forgiven, that they have *not* repented – that they cannot participate in the New Life in Christ Jesus until or unless they change the receptivity of their hearts.

But can any of us claim half of this authority? If you are not willing to proclaim unforgiveness, can you possibly proclaim the forgiveness that heals and mends people’s lives?

Well, some say, Jesus forgives everybody all the time. Remember His words from the Cross? “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” Do we never get tired of bullshit and twaddle? Like: There are no rules, no principles. God never calls us to account. Every way of life is as good as any other. Judge not. It is the Christian way that we always forgive everybody under all circumstances, and we sincerely believe in “the night in which all cats are gray.”

When Jesus spoke from the Cross, He was not pronouncing forgiveness over the entire world and through all time. He was not talking about the Inquisition, Nazi death camps, Pol Pot, or the complete disregard for human life displayed by Joseph Stalin. He was

## HOW BIG IS THE REAL CHRISTMAS GIFT?

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talking about the Roman soldiers who had been assigned to crucify Him. Indeed, they had no knowledge or awareness of who He was or of the magnitude of what they were doing. They were soldiers who were carrying out orders rather mindlessly. That may be sad, but it is not an exoneration of all evil on the face of the earth.

I think Jesus forgave Judas, but I see no indication that He forgave Herod or Caiaphas or most of the Pharisees who fought against His ministry and His purposes all during His life among us. How can I possibly justify such a comment? Try reading Matthew 23:13-33 or Luke 11:37-52. These are not obscure passages tucked away in footnotes somewhere. They are part of the Gospel records and quite out in the open for anyone who bothers to read them. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You travel over sea and land to win one convert; and when you have succeeded you make him twice as fit for hell as you are yourselves.”* (Matthew 23:15) And that’s only a sample.

So which half of Jesus are we willing to follow and obey? Which half of Him is Lord and Savior, and do you really think we can get permission to ignore the other half? No one is more impressed and grateful and appreciative for His love and mercy and forgiveness than I am. But Jesus never insults us with mercy or love that does not call for responsibility on our part. Responsibility is a wonderful word: the ability to respond. Can you imagine making a mistake that cost others real pain or anguish and *not wanting* to repent? Not wanting to change? Not wanting to keep it from happening ever again?

*“If you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.”*  
Is that not also part of the Gospel – part of the Good News? There really is accountability. There really is meaning and purpose to LIFE.