

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
December 14, 2008 – Advent 3
John 1: 1-16
“Receive”

‘Tis the season for giving. And probably most of us are caught up right now in the shopping and baking and sewing and building things business. We have a list of people to give Christmas presents to, and now is the time to get those presents ready. Giving presents is fun. It really is. Don’t you enjoy it? Giving someone you really care about a special gift is truly a wonderful thing. So is putting money in the Salvation Army bucket, or giving a food basket to a needy family, or giving boots for the homeless stand out, or contributing to the mission offering for Heights Community Congress. This is the season for giving.

And we’ve all been taught how it is more blessed to give than to receive. And how God loves a cheerful giver. And you know, for the most part I think we hear that message loudly and clearly. Especially in these months of the year. Here at church we’ve just gone through our annual stewardship campaign and you heard over and over the need for us to give generously and willingly. So far \$130 thousand some dollars has been pledged by you for 2009. We are pretty good at giving. And to be honest the way some of you give of yourselves to this church and its people is downright amazing. Let me embarrass a few of you, if you don’t mind:

A week ago Saturday Betty Nelson was here preparing lunch for everyone who came to “clean and green” the sanctuary for Christmas. Then she was back here on Sunday morning cooking delicious soup for all of us in the congregation who stayed for our First Sunday Soup lunch. Very nice.

Mary Ann Carlson does more food related giving than I can keep track of.....our monthly community dinner, helping with the InterAct Meal, providing refreshments this

week for the Heights Interfaith Council meeting which Redeemer hosted, and just calling up people in the church and bringing them her homemade treats. Again, very nice.

How about James Graham making these banner decorations, and the wreaths, and doing all the Trustee related stuff he does on top of all that?

Or Beverly Holland decorating our bulletin boards, putting together these Advent Devotionals, being part of a care-giving ministry team, always helping with the children, and always being so gracious?

And David Miller, our Lay Leader; and Eric Skinner, our go-to fix it man; and Michelle Gillespie, our Holiday Market coordinator, and Kari Sharpe, our altar decorator and council chairperson and adult Sunday School teacher --- and the list of giving people in this church goes on and on. The giving around here never stops. The giving in our Christian lives never stops. We are people who give. At Christmas time and all year round.

But today's sermon is called "Receive", and with all our usual emphasis on Christian giving it may seem strange for us to talk about receiving. But it's good that we do, because Christmas really is all about God sending his son Jesus to us to live and dwell among us. Christmas is about God's gift of redeeming and saving love. And for all the attention paid to how we too are to be givers of love, the truth is that we are first receivers. Before we can share with others, we receive. Before we can tell the story of God's good news we have to hear and receive it ourselves. Before we can give a Christmas we have to receive and believe and experience Christmas.

And I really do think that receiving is a harder thing for us to accept than is giving. At least for grown-up Christians. Children regarding receiving more naturally? I remember a 4-year old little boy sitting on the floor Christmas morning surrounded by packages and the smile on his face was the biggest you could imagine and the gleam in his eye was like a shining star and he exclaimed joyously, without reservation, without

holding back, “I love Christmas!” As we get older, however, our receiving becomes more self-conscious. Haven’t you ever worried that the gift you were given cost too much? Or that the giver went to too much trouble? “Oh, you shouldn’t have”, we say. “You didn’t have to give me anything”. Sometimes receiving embarrasses us because it puts us on the spot. Everyone’s watching to see our reaction, to hear our response. And what if we really don’t like the gift? Haven’t we all learned to be polite and not say anything that might offend the giver? If we can, we’ll exchange it later. Or put it away in some discrete place, maybe getting it out when we know the giver might see it. Receiving is just as simple as it seems, is it? Giving really is easier.

In my personal life, I have experienced two distinct ways of giving and receiving birthday and Christmas presents. In one tradition, the person opening the gift always acts as if the gift being opened is the best darn thing ever seen in their life. “Oh, this is just what I always wanted!” is pretty much the standard reply. There are always lots of big thank-yous expressed and lots of big smiles on everyone’s face. So I didn’t learn until about 20 years later that the lovely silk nightgown I had bought for my mother with my own money from the first Christmas break job I had during college was 3 sizes too big. She didn’t return it because she didn’t have the heart. She knew how proud I was to buy it. People in this family always say they like the presents they receive, even if they don’t.

In another family tradition I have experienced, people never said much one way or the other. Back when everyone still exchanged gifts, the presents would sit under the Christmas tree all day, until finally sometime late Christmas afternoon they got around to opening them. And then opened them quietly and seriously and privately. Usually you never knew what anybody got unless you were nosy enough to ask them. But if and when they did watch each other open gifts, and in particular the gift from them, before you’d even taken the bow off the box they’d tell you that if you didn’t like it you could always take it back. And it seemed like they were always just a bit surprised when you did like the gift. As time went on I learned that the grandmother in that family had never kept any gift she received. No matter what people gave her, she always

traded it in for something else. So I understood where the givers were coming from, and why giving and receiving gifts in that family is more matter of fact.

Both of these ways of giving and receiving have had their embarrassing and uncomfortable moments. With each tradition there were parts I liked and parts I didn't like. Which just confirms the point I am trying to make – which is that this whole business of giving and receiving is rather complicated. A lot of emotional stuff gets wrapped up in the packages we wrap and unwrap. Personality issues, family traditions, expectations – all these go along with how it is we go about our giving and receiving.

So how do we receive Jesus Christ? How do we accept God's Christmas gift? Quiet yourself for a moment and listen as we imagine God telling us this:

“Okay, folks, here is my gift to you. It is without a doubt the best gift you'll ever receive, from me or anyone else. But don't worry about that – yes, it's a costly gift, and yes, you are definitely worth the price. Because I love you more than words can ever say. This is my own dear son, folks. My own dear Son. He is who I am, he is my love, my truth, my mercy, my power, my grace, my wisdom, my light, my peace, my joy, my mystery, my glory, all bundled up together and made into your flesh so that you can see him and behold him and follow him and love him. For when you see him, my people, you see me. And when you receive him into your hearts and lives, there will I dwell as well. Because what I want most of all is for you to feel as close to me as I am to you. I want you to know me and to be in relationship with me and to let me guide and direct your life. So I give you this gift. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed. And even if you aren't ready to accept the gift, I won't take it back. It's yours to hold onto right now or wait until the time is right for you later on. Either way I give it to you. Because I want to. Because I love you. Merry Christmas, my people. Merry Christmas, world. Merry Christmas”.

The gift is given. The gift is already given. So no matter how complicated our other arrangements are, with God Christmas is fairly simple. Here's Christmas. Here's

love. Here's Jesus Christ. Here's my best gift. So receive it. Open your arms, open your eyes, open your hearts, open your lives, and just receive it. No explanations. No exchanges. No pretending. No apprehension. Just receive it. Welcome Christ into your world again this Christmas season. Receive him with graciousness and humility. All the other stuff will work itself out one way or another. Don't be worried about whether you're spending enough money on your gifts this Christmas or worried because you don't have enough money to spend. Don't worry whether you've selected the perfect gift or not. Don't worry about how your gifts compare with the gifts of others.

Receive Christmas before you give Christmas. Let Christ into your heart and let Christ warm your cold spirit and feed your hungry soul and fill your empty life. Receive God's gift of perfect love. That's what really matters. The other stuff will fall into place. But have you set a place for Christ around the table of your life? Is there room for Christ in the Bethlehem inn of your heart? Are you a gracious host, welcoming the Christmas guest himself into the very middle of things, letting him join in all that you do?

"He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth....From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace".