

## Gifts Without Tags

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. *Luke 6:37-38*

It's likely you're reading this as big red hearts and Valentine's candy dominate the commercial scene. But as I write, it is still early January in the Rainwater home. The Tree will be coming down soon. The presents have all been unwrapped. The goodies digested. Even the beloved Christmas music is making a reluctant exit. I can't even rely on the 12 days of Christmas to extend my good holiday mood any more. In a word (ok, 3 words)... Christmas is over. And that is depressing. So on this winter day in January, would you allow me to share one more Christmas memory before the boxes are all packed up?

It was the year Mom decided that labels on gifts were not needed. Why? I don't know why. You will need to ask her. After all, how is a precocious, inquisitive, only child with questionable impulse control to know which present to measure, handle, and shake until the flimsy scotch tape holding the whole darn thing together was pushed to its limit. Oh wait... maybe that's the reason! Anyway, Mom decided no labels and so there were no labels. She assured us she knew which gift was whose since she was the one who wrapped almost all the gifts any way... even her own! She had some special code or something.

And all went very well through all of Advent. Precocious, inquisitive, only child with questionable impulse control was thwarted and was rarely found sneaking around under the Tree through most of December. And generally there was peace in the Rainwater home. Finally, Christmas Eve! In our household, Santa always came while we attended Christmas Eve candlelight service. It may or may not have been at the request of the parents of the precocious, inquisitive, only child with questionable impulse control who were tired of being awoken at 0-dark-30 on Christmas Day.

Christmas Eve... and suddenly Mom's ingenious plan went terribly wrong. Her special code had failed as precocious, inquisitive, only child with questionable impulse control received a gift he did not expect... a luxurious pink bathrobe in his mother's size. The evening's proceedings did not improve. Mamu (my grandmother) received that toy I was looking forward to all year. I could elaborate but I think you get the idea. Even Santa's deliveries, apparently, had been caught in this web of chaos. Mom's ingenious plan went terribly wrong. And yet Christmas went so right. I don't remember our family laughing more or having more fun as gifts were given and then given again.

As I reflect on this Christian walk that we share, I am convinced that God has forgotten to put labels on the gifts God has given. Why? You will have to ask Jesus why, but it appears to me some things have gotten mixed up. I have seen how what I have been given has become so much more when I have shared it with another. And as I look at some of what has been given to you, I'm quite sure it's really your neighbor that needs it. Don't worry, though. I'm would bet if you decide to share with her what is hers, you may find she is holding your gift. Things may have got mixed up, but I am sure of one thing: There are enough presents under the Tree for everyone.

That's why we do what we do as a church sharing the Good News of God's Grace in Jesus Christ in the multitude of ways that we can. That's why we try to fulfill the mission of the United Methodist Church, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." We don't do this work so our church can remain strong and we can continue to enjoy what we we have received and think is ours. We do so because what is in our hands, what we feel in our hearts, whatever we gain from participation in each of our faith communities, may not really be ours, except for us to give away.

I told you to ask Jesus, but here is my guess to God's mixed up no-labels-on-gifts plan. The biggest gift God gives is not in the things we own, the talents we possess, the status we think we have. The greatest gift is meeting the Christ in the other and the blessings of being the body of Christ as we share what has been placed in our hands or our hearts that God really intends for someone else.

Christmas is over, but the gift giving has just begun. May you have a blessed 2017.

*Rev. Jeff Rainwater Wyoming District Superintendent January 10, 2017*