

## TRANSPARENT GIFTS

(11/13/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Galatians 2:19b-20  
John 14:8-20

*“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”* (Galatians 2:20)

*“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”*  
(John 14:9-10)

Last week, on All Saints and All Souls Sunday, I mentioned in my sermon that Jesus was transparent to God. Following the worship service, a number of people asked me if I would say a little more about this. I don’t want to get into a technical discussion concerning how many constitutes a number. Technically, one is a number, as is twenty. Zero is sort of a number because we use it as a number, but since it is nothing, no thing, it can’t really be something. I will have to ask Rick about whether zero really exists, and what happens when you try to divide a common integer by zero. But this isn’t the point.

When we say that Jesus was transparent to God, we express our belief and hopefully also our experience that when we see Jesus, we see through him to God. We can do this because Jesus is not only *from* God; he is *of* God. Last week, I asked us to consider what people see when they see us. Do they see through us to Jesus, as they would if we have taken on the mind and the heart of Jesus? Or do they just see us? I suggested that if they only see us, that perhaps there is too much of us; perhaps we are blocking people’s perception of that God whom the Protestant existential theologian Paul Tillich called “the Ground of our Being.”

What I was trying to say about transparency is cogently captured in the following saying:

*Live your life in such a way that people who don’t know God but who know you will come to know God because they know you.*

This is what will happen if we are transparent to God; it is what will happen if we are transparent to Jesus. And this is the most powerful, the most meaningful, the most authentic, and the most effective type of evangelization.

This morning, as we celebrate stewardship season in the life of our little church, let’s think about transparency from a slightly different perspective. Let’s think about it from the perspective of gifts.

Do you like gifts? Do you like to receive gifts? What do you like about receiving gifts? Do you like to give gifts? Why do you like to give gifts? Or perhaps you like to both give and receive.

What makes a gift so meaningful? We know there must be something special because we are deeply touched by thoughtful and sensitive gifts. It is not the cost of the gift that makes it meaningful. Well, perhaps this is at least a factor. If someone (like my wife or children) were to give me a new fully electric BMW sedan, I would consider it a very meaningful gift! Just saying . . .

Gifts are what has been described as a “love language;” they are one of the ways that we can both express and experience love. People for whom gifts is their primary love language find the giving and receiving of gifts especially meaningful. The same object means much more to us when we receive it as a gift than when we purchase it ourselves.

It is appropriate that we should reflect on the nature of gifts as we consecrate our pledges of financial support to the church for the coming year. We also know how gifts are inextricably interwoven into our observance of Advent and Christmas, for they were an important part of the story of the very first Christmas. In addition to the Magi’s three highly symbolic gifts to the baby Jesus, we believe that Jesus was God’s great gift to the world.

Not long ago I ran across a quote by the Roman Catholic spiritual guide Henri Nouwen that helped me understand gifts. Nouwen suggests that when we own an object it belongs to us. Because it belongs to us; because we own it, the object is opaque. We can’t see through it. We don’t see any further than the object. Gifts, however, are transparent. Nouwen suggests that when we receive the same object as a gift, we see through the gift to the giver. A gift is three-dimensional. It can be one of the deepest and longest-lasting forms of connection.

The more I thought about this quote, the more sense it made. It also occurred to me that the more things that we can see or experience as gifts, the more deeply connected we will be to their source. For example, if we see Jesus as a gift, we will see through Jesus to God. Jesus will be transparent to God. Then we will understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” “Whoever has seen me has seen the One who dwells in me and is responsible for all my words and works.” We will understand what the apostle Paul meant when he said, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

Let me give you some examples. I have three religious objects on my desk downstairs. The first is a replica of Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Hand of God*. In this sculpture God's hand is shaping Adam and Eve out of a lump of clay. I have been privileged to view the original in the Rodin Museum in Paris. The second is a statue of Jesus seated in the classic *zazen* or meditative position. I like this statue because, like Thich Nhat Hanh, I believe this is what Jesus did during the forty days in the wilderness following his baptism: he meditated. I believe it was from the depth of this meditative experience that he came to realize who he was and the ministry of teaching and healing to which he was called.

The third object is a cross of spikes. The spikes are very sharp. As the cross nears its base, the color changes from gold to black to a bright red. This cross reminds me not to glamorize or romanticize Jesus' crucifixion. When I touch the sharp end of one of the spikes, I am reminded of the tremendous pain Jesus must have felt when these were driven through his hands and feet.

These three objects are meaningful partially because they are symbols; they lead us through the object to the spiritual truth, the spiritual reality behind the object. They are transparent or at least translucent to the deeper reality they convey. They are especially meaningful to me because they were gifts. Two of them were given to me by my wife; the other was given to me by a close friend, a Roman Catholic nun. When I look at these objects, I see through them to the persons who gave them to me, and I feel a deep sense of connection, a deep sense of gratitude.

We see things differently when we view them as transparent gifts rather than opaque objects. For example, we can think of the universe as just molecules and atoms and other stuff like Higgs bosons bouncing around. However, if we see it as a gift, it becomes transparent; we can see through the creation to the Creator. When we do this, we are touched by awe!

We can think of life as a carbon-based accident. When we see it this way, it has no meaning and our individual lives have no meaning, at least no meaning deeper than the pursuit of survival, which is an undertaking doomed to failure. When our life ends, it is just over. However, if we see our life as a gift from God, as an incarnation of God, as a creative expression of God's love, then life becomes a precious miracle and our life becomes especially meaningful! If we view life this way, we will not fear when the time comes to return the gift to the Giver.

A beautiful sunset can be viewed as nothing but sunlight refracting off dust particles in the atmosphere. It can also stir us to a sense of awe, the realization that the

beauty and intricacy of creation tell us something about its creator. The same is true of love. Is love simply a specific type of social bonding that has a survival benefit? Or is it one of the greatest gifts, one of the greatest powers, one of the greatest mysteries of the universe? If we see it this way, we will understand what John meant when he said that “God is love, and those who dwell in love dwell in God and God dwells in them.”

This morning I would like us to think about our church. This little church has been in existence for over 157 years. The gifts of past generations brought this little church into being and sustained it through good times and bad, times of plenty and times of want. When we see this church not as an object, as our possession, which would make it opaque, but as a gift from generations past, which would make it transparent, we are filled with a very deep gratitude.

Let me be more specific. As you know, we have a beautiful sanctuary in this church. It is a wonderful place to worship. It is also a very beautiful place to sit quietly and pray. Yes, it is *our* sanctuary. Technically, it belongs to us. But it is also much more than this. Let me list some of the objects in this sanctuary that were given to us as gifts. Then, when we see them, we can hopefully see through the gifts to the givers and feel a deep connection with them.

The outside doors that were given in memory of Tom and Gwen Sickles replaced doors that were given in memory of Helen Killam, an old-time member of this church.

The doors at the back of the sanctuary were given in Howard Norcross’s memory. Howard was Jan Norcross’s father-in-law.

Howard and Gladys Norcross gave us the piano in memory of their daughter, Elaine. This piano was later moved down to the vestry and was replaced by a piano that Gayle Nittler gave in memory of her husband, Bert. The grand piano in the front of our sanctuary was given to us by David Park, a friend of our church.

“The Girls Club” (that’s what they called it in the old days!) gave us the communion case hanging on the wall at the back of the sanctuary in memory of Mabel Wallace Bent.

The Bible on the altar was given in memory of Wallace N. Nelson. Wallace was Bob and Bud Nelson and Ethel Nelson Armstrong’s father.

The two offering plates were given in memory of Aurora Reynolds Nelson. Aurora was Bob and Bud and Ethel’s mother.

The brass flower vases and the brass candle lighter were given in memory of Winifred Stone.

Elven and Marguerite Riggles gave us the wooden baptismal font in memory of their parents. Elven's father actually made it—which is amazing! Elven was the pastor of this church from 1984-89. Elven's mother gave us the painting of the church that hangs in our narthex.

Bud Williams, Arlene's husband, made the two white tables on each side of the altar.

Teresa Boyce, one of the new members of our church family, gave us one of the paintings that grace the walls of our sanctuary and a painting of Jesus walking with his two disciples on the road to Emmaus. I am not sure whether I will hang this in the vestry or claim it for my own office. Darlene and I found another of the paintings that grace the walls of our sanctuary at an antique store in Lawrence. All the furniture in my office, by the way, was given by Bob and Karin Farmer in loving memory of Karin's sister, Doris Roessler.

Wallace Nelson made either the pulpit or the lectern or both. That's right—he made it/them! This was a major piece of work!

The Bible School donated the kneeler, which was made by Bud Williams, in celebration of Ron and Agnes Nelson's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Agnes was the first woman Deacon of the church. We seldom use the kneeler, because we're not Episcopalians, but that's the topic of another sermon.

Carol Merchant, Pat Grogan's mother, give us the pew cushions in memory of Bill Merchant, Pat's father. We should thank her every Sunday morning for making our worship experience more comfortable.

Henry Kaler's family gave us the brass communion set in his memory.

David Sickles and Dennis Roy gave us the flower pedestals that frame the altar.

Evelyn Till donated the lamp on the top of the piano. Dorothy Watkins donated the organ light.

Tom and Gwen Sickles, who were both long-time choir members, gave us the funds we needed to install the rail going up into the choir loft, the second set of stairs to the choir loft, and the carpeting in the choir loft.

Sixty church members or families gave us the carpeting that was installed in 1988.

The lights in the choir loft were given in memory of Beth Hook's father, Ed Lambert.

Bob and Karin Farmer donated the white communion tablecloth.

The paraments, the cloth hangings on the pulpit and lectern were given to us by several church members. Bob and Sarah L'Heureux gave us the red paraments and red altar cloth in memory of Sarah's mother, Nancy Ferguson, who loved this church. We use them on special occasions such as Reformation Sunday and Pentecost. Dorothy Minville donated the white ones that are used during the Christmas and Easter seasons, and her husband Joe gave us the green ones that are used for most of the church year. Rae Kay gave us the purple paraments, the colors of Advent and Lent.

The altar curtain was given in loving memory of June Armstrong (Ethel Armstrong's sister-in-law), Helen Hoisington (Evelyn Till's mother), George Lees (Beverly Lees' husband), Maddison Webster (Scott and Lynn Webster's child), and Winifred Stone (a long-time member of this church).

The carpeting in the narthex was given in memory of Martha Nutting.

The relatively new choir robes were given by Arlene Williams, Dianne Simmons, Joan Brunelle, Dennis Roy, David Sickles, Paul and Darlene Sanderson, Tom and Gwen Sickles, Skip and Sharon Willman, Zella Thompson, Rae Kay, Dan and Pam Jackman, Charles and Barbara Masterman, Dana and Mary Richmond, and the Woman's Fellowship.

Millie Turenne provided us with the funds we needed to install the chair lift that makes it possible for parishioners to access the sanctuary from the vestry. She gave us the crèche that graces our sanctuary during Advent. She gave us the railing leading up the center of the front steps of the church. This railing can be removed if needed, e.g., to bring a casket into the church.

Millie also gave us the original sound system, the one that was here when I arrived. The major upgrade to what we have now was installed several years ago from Sarah L'Heureux's memorial fund.

As you will note from the dedication in the front cover of the red hymnals, Rae Kay donated them in memory of her husband, Robert. Martha Templeman and Karin Farmer gave us the blue hymnals in memory of William C. Palmer and Heinrich and Anna Roessler.

The wooden plaque listing the names of the pastors of this church from its inception in 1865 to the present was made and donated to the church by Robert Nelson, our sexton and long-time choir member. It was presented to the church on the occasion of our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In 1924 Miss Eugenie Bent organized a fund drive to purchase the stained-glass windows.

The wireless hearing assistance system that is used by several of our members was purchased from the following persons' memorial funds: Dorothy Watkins, Winifred Stone, Robert Nelson, Mary Brown, Mildred Turenne, and Sarah L'Heureux.

By the way, the memorial funds from which we drew to purchase so much for this sanctuary were only there because members of this church and friends of the deceased made a donation to the church in their loved one's memory. When we have a need that we think is an appropriate use of a memorial fund, the Diaconate contacts the person's family to see if they think this would be a fitting use. This makes the purchase especially meaningful.

We also need to remember that the Massachusetts Home Mission Society of the Congregational Church supported us financially for the first forty-eight years of our existence. From 1865-1895 they gave us \$350/year, and from 1895-1913 they gave us \$75/year. That went a lot further back then! Without their support we would not be here today. So, this gift helps us see back to our roots as Congregationalists.

I have been apprehensive about sharing this list because I am certain that I have left some gifts out, that I have left some people out. This is what I have been able to pull together from the records and from people's memories, and I welcome any additions or corrections you might be able to offer. I would like to compile a list of the other gifts that were given, gifts like the church signs, the doors downstairs, and the names of all the

people, especially the women, who were instrumental in raising money for and designing our church kitchen, which like the proverbial hearth, is the center of our life as a church.

I know that we, the official members of this church, technically own this church. It belongs to us—every stick of furniture. We own the land on which it stands. It is ours. Although, speaking of the land, I would point out that one of our church members in the mid-nineteenth century gave us the land upon which our present church stands as a gift.

However, Henri Nouwen is correct: we view our church differently when we see it not as a thing, a collection of things that we own, but as a gift, a collection of gifts, myriad expressions of love and devotion shared with us by generations past! When we look at everything in this church, and especially this sanctuary as a gift, we can see through the gift to the giver, and we have a deep sense of their presence right here with us!

Last but by no means least, we feel the same way about the many gifts you give to this church. As gifts that arise out of your commitment to this church, this community of faith, they are not opaque. They are transparent! Please know that we see through your many gifts of time, talent and treasure to you, the giver—and we are deeply grateful.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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