

2018



ADVENT

DEVOTIONS

Prepared for Members and Friends of
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
of Sulphur, Louisiana

Christmas shopping has always been one of my favorite activities. I used to love to roam from store to store and now I enjoy roaming from website to website. But this year I want to focus on gifts that can be given without taxing my bank balance. No, I'm not trying to be cheap. I want to give gifts that are meaningful and lasting. This year's devotions deal with "What gifts can I give this year?" It is my prayer that God will use these meditations to bless you and to aid in providing you with a rich experience with God during this Advent time.

In Christ,
Bobbie Yellott, Pastor
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12-2-18

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2

Psalm 90:12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹² So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

If I could save time in a bottle
The first thing that I'd like to do
Is to save every day
Till eternity passes away
Just to spend them with you

These words from Jim Croce's 1970 song "*Time in a Bottle*" describe the first gift I would like to give this Christmas. I know I can't manufacture time; twenty-four hours is all any day will ever have. So the gift I would like to give others is not more time, but my time.

When I spend time with others, for that period of time I need to abandon multi-tasking. To truly be a gift, the time I dedicate to others must not be diluted with an eye on my cell phone or my head in a book. As the Psalmist knew, our time is finite. One of the most important ways I can invest my time is by giving it away, spending it with others whose time then becomes a gift to me.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3

Jeremiah 29:12 New International Version (NIV)

¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

Our prayer lives depend on the knowledge that God does listen to us. God wants to have a relationship with us, and relationships require listening. Human relationships require listening, too. The Hollies' 1968 song "Listen to Me" includes this line:

*Listen to me and very soon I think you'll find
Somebody wants to help you, somebody seems to care*

So the next gift I want to give this Christmas is the gift of listening. It is so important to hear and to be heard. I'm sure you've been involved in a conversation with someone who wasn't really listening to you. They were waiting for you to take a breath so they could jump in with what they'd been thinking while you were talking. Sometimes they don't even wait. This is not the gift I want to give. When I listen, I want to be totally involved, an active listener, communicating by my attention the fact that I do care.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4

1 Thessalonians 5:11 New International Version (NIV)

¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.

I'll bet you recognize these song lyrics:

Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way
See how they shine

They come from Simon and Garfunkel's song of the year for 1971, "*Bridge over Troubled Water.*"

The gift of encouragement wasn't on deep discount on Black Friday, but it's an extremely valuable gift that I want to give this year. When I was teaching, I said offhandedly to a class, "I know you can do this." One student told me later that she felt I was speaking directly to her and took the encouragement to heart. She said that was what enabled her to pass my class.

Christian author Joyce Landorf Heatherly wrote a masterful book entitled Balcony People celebrating people who are in the "balcony" of your life, cheering you on, energizing you with their affirmation. I want to be an encourager, a balcony person for others.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Colossians 3:12 New International Version (NIV)

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

So it's one more round for experience
And I'm on the road again
And it's going to take some time this time

Both the apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians and Carole King in her song made popular by the Carpenters speak of the precious gift of patience. Most of us have heard the prayer, "O Lord, give me patience and give it to me now."

I had a poster in my office that read "Please be patient; God isn't finished with me yet." I want others to be patient with me. In like manner I want to give this same gift of patience to others. I missed one math class (for a choir performance) when I was a college freshman. This was the day the professor explained the proof of the Binomial Theorem. There was one step that just wasn't sinking in for me, and I made a number of lengthy visits to the professor's office, until finally it made sense. That instructor's patience was contagious and became fundamental to my teaching style. That is the gift I want to pass on this Christmas.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6

Philippians 4:5 New International Version (NIV)

⁵ *Let your gentleness be evident to all.*

In his 1988 song “*I’m Counting on You*”, Tom Jones sang
I'm counting on you
To bring that sweet gentleness to your world and all that you do

A few years ago I was embroiled in a very emotional situation. The inevitable bad outcome was obvious to me and I was highly frustrated that those around me did not see what was so obvious to me. Venting to a friend, I received this advice, “Be gentle.” I wanted to shout, “But they...” Her words, though, remained. “Be gentle.” That was not really in my nature. But I was being called to gentleness.

Mercifully, I took her advice on that occasion, and have continued to follow that advice and to share it with others. In 1742 Charles Wesley penned a poem entitled “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.” In speaking of the Gentle Jesus, theologian Dan Doriani wrote, “We learn gentleness by observing how Jesus was gentle and then following him. If we try to notice gentle people, we may especially look for people like ourselves, just a little nicer. Instead we should look for people who have a way of putting others first.” I wish to give this gift of gentleness.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7

Ephesians 6:7 New International Version (NIV)

⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,

Bill Withers' 1972 hit "*Lean on Me*" includes the words

You just call on me brother when you need a hand,
We all need somebody to lean on

This Christmas I hope to give the gift of service. Out of economic necessity I have done this before, when I was a child. I created elaborately drawn coupon books for my parents, offering such things as a home-cooked meal (Yes, I really can cook – I made an "A" in Home Economics!), an hour of ironing, a car wash, and so on.

In retrospect, these were great gifts. How many people really need another sit-pretty to clutter their shelves? When I give the gift of service I am able to meet genuine needs in love. I pray that I might be someone that others can lean on.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

Colossians 4:2 New International Version (NIV)

² *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

In 1988 the popular contemporary Christian musician wrote a song entitled “*Pray for Me*”, which includes the line

Pray for me and I'll pray for you

How often have you spoken with someone who is ill or grieving or dealing with some other crisis, and you conclude your conversation with “You’ll be in my prayers” or “I’ll pray for you”? But do you?

I admit it: I’ve forgotten to pray for people before. I’ll hear someone’s troubles on the street or at lunch and I say “I’ll pray for you” and I’ve forgotten. It won’t be until I see the person again and remember their grievance or trouble and ask about them that I realize I didn’t pray for them on the previous occasion.

So the gift I want to give is the gift of prayer. When I say “I’ll pray for you,” I’ll do it. Maybe I’ll even do it right then, at that moment. Believing in the power of prayer and in God’s presence with us when we pray, I will gladly share that gift with others.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9

1 Thessalonians 5:18 New International Version

¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

I'll readily admit to being a huge James Taylor fan. I've lost track of the number of times I've seen him in concert, and I think I own every album he's made (Vinyl, cassette, and CD – I gave away the eight tracks.) His 1975 song "*How Sweet It Is to Be Loved by You*" includes the lines

With sweet love and devotion, deeply touching my emotion, I want to stop
and thank you baby.

As children we were taught to say "Thank you" and to write Thank You notes when we received gifts. But gratitude is about more than manners. I discovered a list of 7 Scientifically Proven Benefits of Gratitude:

- Gratitude opens the door to more relationships.
- Gratitude improves physical health.
- Gratitude improves psychological health.
- Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.
- Grateful people sleep better.
- Gratitude improves self-esteem.
- Gratitude increases mental strength.

I will freely give the gift of gratitude this Christmas.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10

Ephesians 4:32 New International Version (NIV)

³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another,*

American rock musician Todd Rundgren released the song “*Compassion*” in 1981. One verse of the song says

What are riches untold in a life without compassion?

For there's no winter as cold

As a life without compassion.

There's no prescription that's sold

That can heal you like compassion.

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion,” wrote the Dalai Lama XIV in The Art of Happiness. And lest we dismiss compassion as just a noble feeling, consider the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu:

Frequently people think compassion and love are merely sentimental.

No! They are very demanding. If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action.

I choose to give to others this active gift of compassion.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11

Matthew 8:15 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁵ He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.

The touch of Jesus was healing. We read in the Gospels of the blind, lepers, the deaf, those with fevers and hemorrhages, all were healed by the touch of the Lord. And our touch can be healing, too. No, I'm not saying that we can cure illnesses just by our own touch (although I wouldn't say it couldn't happen if God were in it.) But the connection that comes when people touch is more than just a physical sensation.

Do you remember the Diana Ross hit, "*Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)*" from 1970? The chorus says

Reach out and touch Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place If you can

So many people in our world are touch-deprived. Particularly, but not exclusively, the elderly population includes many who live alone and lonely. The hug I give them on Sunday morning may be the only physical contact they'll have all week. I will be very sure to give the healing gift of touch.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Proverbs 11:13 New International Version (NIV)

*¹³ A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.*

Etta James sang in “*Trust in Me*” from 1960:

Trust in me in all you do
Have the faith I have in you
Love will see us through,
if only you trust in me

A good parable of trust in our home is our blind cat Duchess. On those occasions when she slips outside (without our permission), she lives in terror. She treats her surroundings as if she’s in the jungle, and she trembles with fear. But when she comes inside, she sprawls out on the bedroom carpet, soaking up the sun’s rays streaming through the French doors. She falls asleep in total trust, oblivious to the fact that any of her four humans might easily step on her tiny body.

Duchess lives in complete confidence in her human companions. (In this connection, I think the best animal analogy for trust is purring.) Every time I see Duchess lying there, purring in her sleep, I think, “That’s what Jesus wants me to do – to trust him.” The kind of trust Duchess shows is the trust Jesus invites from us. I will attempt to give the gift of trust.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13

Proverbs 17:17 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁷ A friend loves at all times,

And as the years go by
Our friendship will never die
You're gonna see it's our destiny
You've got a friend in me

This final verse of “*You’ve Got a Friend in Me*” from the classic Disney movie *Toy Story* always moves me to tears, no matter how many times I see the show. Friendship is such a sacred thing.

When I taught the Statistics unit of Mathematics for Elementary School Teachers, I used an anonymous survey to collect data. One question on the survey was “How many close friends do you have?” It was not unusual for students to respond “one or two.” I found that women generally counted more close friends than did men. But I was truly saddened when one person answered with zero close friends.

Our family relocated frequently when I was a child. I attended eleven schools in twelve years, so it was difficult to make and keep friends. Hence I place a high value on friendship and will strive to give the gift of friendship this Christmas.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14

1 Timothy 6:17 New International Version (NIV)

17 ... put (your) hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Back in the Sixties there was a delightful rock group called The Turtles. Their biggest and best-known hit was released in 1967. It was entitled "*Happy Together*." The words weren't profound; here's a sample:

So happy together
How is the weather?
So happy together
We're happy together

The song was just – fun. That's a gift I want to give this Christmas, the gift of fun. Paul noted in his letter to Timothy that God provides us everything for our enjoyment. It's not a sin to have fun (I suppose that depends on *how* you have fun.)

I know we all define fun in different ways. I happen to think that verifying a challenging trigonometric identity is fun. So is solving a difficult puzzle – Sudoku, word find, jumble, crossword – I like them all. For others, I imagine these endeavors might seem more like torture. But I will seek to learn what constitutes fun for those around me and then make an effort to give them that gift. As the esteemed Dr. Seuss said, "Fun is good."

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

Titus 1:8 New International Version (NIV)

⁸ *Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*

Billy Joel, the Piano Man, wrote the song “*Honesty*” in 1979. The chorus laments

Honesty is such a lonely word
Everyone is so untrue
Honesty is hardly ever heard
And mostly what I need from you

We all lie. Admittedly, most of do so only occasionally. But we still all do. Yet most of us also consider ourselves honest. In his book, *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely offers evidence that we're able to believe we're honest even though we lie or cheat by doing so only in little ways. We're therefore able to tell ourselves we're mostly honest—that is, we're only dishonest in ways that we think don't matter.

For Christmas this year I will give the gift of honesty. I will choose to deal honestly with those around me, even when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable. As the prolific author, Anonymous, has written, “If you want to be trusted, be honest.”

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16

1 Peter 2:17 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone,

Who can hear the word *respect* without thinking of the Otis Redding's song popularized by Aretha Franklin in 1967.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me

Children growing up in the South in the 1960s were taught to address parents, teachers, in fact all adults as Ma'am or Sir. It was "Yes, Ma'am" or "No, Ma'am," "Yes, Sir" or "No, Sir." Respect was automatic, merited by the adult's status as an adult.

When our family moved from Louisiana to California in 1962, we were treated like aliens by both children and adults when we used those terms of respect.

Many argue that, in the words of Bob Dylan, "the times they are a changin'." The loss of civility is lamented in the press and social media. My goal, then, this Christmas is to heed the words of Peter by showing proper respect to everyone.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17

Galatians 5:22 New International Version (NIV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

The rock group Three Dog Night released the future number one hit “*Joy to the World*” in November 1970. Not the Christmas standard, this was the “Jeremiah had a bullfrog” version which ended with these words:

Joy to the world
All the boys and girls
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me

A wonderful gift to give this year will be the gift of joy. Now joy and happiness are not the same thing. We can have joy and be unhappy! Happiness comes from circumstances in our lives. When things go our way- we are happy. However, when things don't go our way, we are no longer happy- but we can still have joy. God is the source of the joy in our lives. I want to share this gift of joy.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18

2 Corinthians 8:2-3 New International Version (NIV)

² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.

We are the world,
We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day
So, let's start giving
There's a choice we're making

I imagine you recognized these words, penned by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, originally recorded by the supergroup United Support of Artists (USA) for Africa in 1985. The record release earned over 63 million dollars to feed starving people in Africa, especially Ethiopia.

The gift this Scripture and song inspire in me is generosity. I recently read this story of generosity: A stay-at-home mother in Oklahoma, was about to pay the grocery store cashier for food for her family's Thanksgiving dinner last November when a customer tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Ma'am, I'm going to pay for your groceries."

The woman stepped in and swiped her credit card, paying the \$214 grocery bill, and then left. This is generosity, a gift I wish to give this year.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Romans 8:28 New International Version (NIV)

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with mister in between

"Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" is a popular song which was published in 1944. The music was written by Harold Arlen and the lyrics by Johnny Mercer. The song was presented in the style of a sermon and extolled the virtue of optimism.

A joke is told about the "optimist" who fell or jumped off New York City's Empire State Building. As he passed the sixtieth floor, someone asked, "How's it going?" He responded: *"So far, so good!"*

A fine gift to share this Christmas is the gift of optimism. As people of faith, we know that God's got this. Or in the words of Paul to the church in Rome, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

2 Timothy 2:2 New International Version (NIV)

² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

Perhaps James Taylor's best known musical hit is "You've Got a Friend", written by Carole King in 1971. The chorus speaks not only of friendship, but also of reliability.

You just call out my name,
and you know where ever I am
I'll come running to see you again
Winter, spring, summer, or fall
All you got to do is call and I'll be there,
You've got a friend

When children were asked to write an essay on the topic of reliability, one girl wrote "My friend had a book that I wanted to read. She told me I could borrow it only if I bring it back next week. I returned it and now she lets me borrow things all the time because she knows that I am reliable." She had proved herself reliable. That is the gift I wish to give to others, the gift of reliability.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21

Colossians 3:12 New International Version (NIV)

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

The gift I'm thinking of today is humility. I have to think of the Mac Davis song:

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
Cause I get better lookin' each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a hell of a man
Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
But I'm doin' the best that I can!

During the Civil War someone reported to Abraham Lincoln that Edwin Stanton, one of the President's cabinet members, had referred to him as a fool. Mr. Lincoln replied, "Well, I must check into that, for I have found that he is usually correct in his judgments."

I'm proud of my humility. Maybe I can share it with you.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

Matthew 6:14 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Elton John released the song “*Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word*” in 1976, including the words

What have I got to do
When sorry seems to be the hardest word

Do you remember the 1970 movie *Love Story*? The most famous line from the movie was “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” I think Elton John was closer to the mark. Sorry may be a hard word to say, or even to hear, but the saying and the hearing are essential in healthy relationships.

Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount of the necessity of forgiving and being forgiven. In the Bible, the Greek word translated “forgiveness” literally means “to let go,” as when a person does not demand payment for a debt.

Knowing that my very life depends on the grace of God, on the forgiveness of God, I desire to give the gift of forgiveness to others and to myself.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23

Romans 12:18 Good News Translation (GNT)

Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody.

Peace

If someday every gun would cease its roar,
If words like "kill" and "maim" were heard no more,
If nations spent no time in waging war,
Would there be peace?

No, peace is not a lack of violence,
It more depends on Christian reverence
As shown to us through God's benevolence,
Yes, this is peace.

Our Lord, who came to earth so long ago,
Gives peace to all who in their living show
The love and joy He meant for us to know.
This, then, is peace.

If universal love prevailed on earth,
If man looked not for faults, but for some worth,
Then would the peace of God find its rebirth.
There would be peace!

(The poem above was written over forty years ago for inclusion in this writer's Christmas cards. The Vietnam War was raging. We still seek peace – on earth and in our hearts.) The gift of peace is one I wish to give.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 24

1 John 4:7 New International Version (NIV)

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

The Carpenters recorded their upbeat ballad “*Top of the World*” in 1972. The words of the chorus have to put a smile on your face. While the song likely celebrated romantic love, the words may equally describe the love between friends or the love between humanity and God.

I'm on the top of the world lookin' down on creation
And the only explanation I can find
Is the love that I've found ever since you've been around
Your love's put me at the top of the world

The gift I'd like to give for Christmas is the gift of love. As Nicholas Sparks wrote in [The Notebook](#), “The best love is the kind that awakens the soul; that makes us reach for more, that plants the fire in our hearts and brings peace to our minds. That’s what I hope to give you forever.”

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25

Proverbs 23:26 New International Version (NIV)

²⁶ *give me your heart and let your eyes delight in my ways,*

The lovely Christmas song "*In the Bleak Midwinter*" ends with the following lines:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

This will be my last Christmas gift to give this year. It's different from all the other gifts, because it's meant to be given to the Lord of Christmas.

Now is born the divine Christ child.

What I can I give him: give him my heart.