

## **Sermon: Wrapping a Pitiful Gift**

Year B, Proper 17

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

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You know those potholder looms? They probably have some fancy name, but you know what I mean? They're square and have little prongs that stick up. How many of you have potholders from those looms? Those potholders are made from loops. It's like they make a long sausage tube of knitted fabric and then cut it down its length. Nowadays those loops are made from a synthetic, nylon-y fabric, and the potholder sort of shrivels to half its size when you take it off the loom. And frankly, as potholders, they're not very good, because they tend to melt in contact with anything hot.

But of all you who have those, how psyched were the humans who gave them to you? Most of those humans were in the 3 to 4 foot range. Most of them would not be allowed in a PG-13 movie. But when kids make those potholders, they are simply delighted with themselves and what they've made.

Why? Think of all the stuff that comes home from school or camp. Those potholders produce a glow in kids that's significantly brighter than all the other key rings and lanyards. How come?

[Doing it themselves. Something so practical. Age when you catch on about giving]

I had one of those looms. In my day the loops were made of thick knit cotton. Those suckers did not shrink when they came off the loom. They were so thick and tight, they would have protected you from nuclear radiation. I gave my grandfather a scarf of a bunch of those lashed together. It barely bent to go around his neck. I was so committed to the idea of the loop as construction medium, that my mother had to convince me to cut the loops I had attached at either end so there was actually fringe, instead of something that looked like fringe. The thing was so stiff and heavy, it would have left bruises if he'd ever actually worn it for real.

But I can remember that scarf. I was so proud of it. On Christmas day, I couldn't wait for him to open it. "Why don't you open this one?" as if I had no idea what was in there. As if the wrapping paper didn't warn him where it was coming from. Whether it was that Christmas or one on either side of it, that's when Christmas changed from what I got to what I got *and* what I gave.

How many of you remember when you made that transition from what you got to what you gave? I hope not many of you gave red and green, off set, bullet proof scarves. What did you give? Did you make it yourself? Was it practical? Did it give you a buzz to give?

Have you had that feeling, post potholders? Tickets to a concert? Showing up at someone's birthday party when they thought you were hours away? Hiring a professional to get a chimney properly lined? Maybe it was seeing a book or a ball cap and just knowing who it was made for.

There is something in that moment, when the person you're giving the gift to sees what it is and looks at you. Whatever the gift is, especially when it comes out of the blue, when you get it just right, there's a connection. They may love the gift. But more than the gift, they love that you have seen them so clearly as the person that they are. It's a moment of witness and it can be transformative.

So when James says *every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights* (James 1:17), he's not leaving out the gifts that come from Walmart or the fireproof red and green scarves. Every gift has the potential to bring us into communion with the recipient. Because that's what communion is, two people being so connected that while separate and individual they are entwined. You hear a song on the radio you've never heard before. You don't like it particularly, but you know your daughter will love it. You two are in communion. But the communion that the two of you are in is only a fraction of the communion that God is promising.

The moment of communion, there over the gift still nestled in its wrapping paper, is so sweet. If we're honest, we want every Christmas and birthday and graduation present to have that in it. What gets in the way? Sometimes it's money, but if we're honest, not too often. More likely is that we ran out of time or didn't sit down and think or one kid needed us to focus on them more than the other one. It's usually an allocation of resources issue, rather than a scarcity of resources.

James talks about one way of overcoming that allocation issue. Listen more, talk less, go ahead and be angry, but don't let that be your first response. Take care of those who are pushed to the sides in your community, those who have less of a chance to come into communion with other people. And do something, don't just talk about it.

And then there's the potholder principle: do it yourself, do something practical and do it with enthusiasm. They're not that different are they?

We're standing on the edge of a new church year. Sunday School will start in a few weeks. Then senior luncheons and the Spaghetti Supper and before you know it Thanksgiving and Christmas. And a whole bunch of grandparents in here will have to brace themselves for potholders.

But before then, we're going to do stewardship. The Finance Committee hasn't even met yet about the budget, not a single appeal has gone out. And some number of us are going to drag boxes of crushed stone all over the property after worship. Isn't that enough for one weekend?

I bring up gifts because sometimes you need some time to listen more, to care for others, to think about what would bring you into communion with others. What would it take for you to get the potholder feeling about your gift to the church? What would it take for you to come into greater communion with the people of this church through your act of giving?

Some things would have to change around here. You know what they are and they're different for every single one of us. Figure out what those things are and see if you can begin to make those changes that would bring you closer to the rest of the community.

Some things would have to change in your heart. There have been very few times that I have been that enthusiastic about a gift I was giving. But when I was, it usually was because I had changed some part of myself to see more clearly the part of someone else. What kind of reframing do you have to do to let you look forward to writing that check, serving on a committee, schlepping those rocks in liquor boxes?

I know there are some of you who will want to explain how you have a bad back and can't carry boxes. I know there are some of you who will want to explain that this year your check can't be quite as big or your time is just so taken up. I'm not looking for guilt. I'm looking for those potholder feelings of not being able to wait to teach three Sundays of Sunday school, or cook one

take home meal or sell one morning's worth of Yard Sale maps because you get to do it with someone you've been meaning to get more familiar with.

I served the nectarines today because they do indeed taste to me like the passage from the Song of Solomon. It was something I could *do* with that Scripture passage, and not just talk about it. But think about the nectarine. It is in complete communion with the pit in at the center. If the tree had its way, the sweet flesh would rot away and form some nutrient rich soil for the pit, so it could spring open and release the seed inside to grow into another tree. Or maybe that sweet flesh would be so tempting that an animal would carry it away to some other spot, where the new tree could flourish. The part of the nectarine that reminds us that the time of singing has come is just the wrapping paper for the pit, for the present inside. Our faith may be locked way inside us, protected from ridicule or judgment by a tough nut. But we can make some sweet wrapping paper that is in complete communion with our connection with God and we can be a joyful as a seven year old handing out her first fully functioning potholders by deciding what gifts we are going to give the church.

Over the coming weeks think about your gifts for the church and how you would like to feel in giving them. What would have to happen for you to feel like the nectarine tastes. What would it take for you to give your gift wrapped in Scripture, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away' for the winter is past; the rain is over and gone."