

My grandmother, who was kind of fanatic about everything, was also a fanatic about game shows, which meant every time I was at her house - sometimes left there while my parents shopped or travelled - I was subjected to every game show on television. Since there was nothing much else to do at her house, I watched them with my grandmother on her little black and white television, and they soon became a guilty pleasure for me, even up to today.

Do you have a favorite, or did you ever have a favorite game show? The popularity of these shows obviously has not waned, because today there is an entire cable channel, the Game Show channel, which shows both new and early shows. Network television is producing at least one of the same shows that existed when I was born – the Price Is Right. Like all of its competitors, today’s Price is Right looks and sounds nothing like the game shows of the fifties and the sixties, but they all share one thing in common – no one who plays ever walks away empty handed. Even if someone wins absolutely nothing, they receive something from the sponsors just for participating, labeled by the ubiquitous term, “A parting gift.”

One of my high school pals competed on Jeopardy, and though he won very little money, he told me that the show was quite generous with their parting gifts. Some of the older shows were a lot cheaper, and their parting gift was usually no more than a home version of the game. If you think about it, giving a home version of the game show in which you just lost was kind of an insult, like saying, “Hey, you need to go home and practice this.”

We give parting gifts to each other, don’t we? Perhaps in one way the game shows got it right, because if there was ever any who needed a home version of Christianity, it is all of us in Christ’s church, because none of us do it right.

The chosen people, Israel, failed their God in the same way that we do – not once, but time after time. No sooner had God freed his people from slavery than they tried to return to it, because following God through the desert was just too difficult. No sooner had Israel been given the law than they started breaking it, or they created their own laws in God's name that resulted not in faithful obedience, but in cumbersome religion. When God's people settled in the promised land, they could have served the Lord as a light in the pagan darkness. Instead, they embraced the vanity of nations, and became little better than the people to whom God had called them to witness.

God sent the prophets as a gift to restore God's people to a right spiritual relationship, but the prophets were ignored, scorned, marginalized, persecuted and martyred. In response to Israel's apostasy and stubborn defiance, God, out of his infinite love, provided his people with a wonderful vision. At the heart of the vision was a promise which declared that, no matter how far Israel strayed from God's love, God would bring them back by means of a good shepherd, a perfect shepherd, who would bring God's people home.

Isaiah was the keeper of God's vision for Israel, and he shared this basic hope throughout his writing: "Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.' The shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord'; and you shall be called, 'Sought Out, a City Not Forsaken.'" God's nation had become a people of boundaries, divisions, territories, walls and fortresses, and in these things they, like us, parted themselves from God and God's purpose, but the Father did not allow the children to leave without a parting gift – one would come who would restore their problems, heal their wounds, break down their walls, and bring them home, where a loving God waited for them.

Jesus came to the world as a gift from God, but he was also one who gave gifts, from the very beginning of his ministry to the moment of his ascension. Some of the most astounding moments in the gospels are when Jesus gives unexpectedly and seemingly beyond possibility. Jesus provides the gift of food for a large crowd, not once, but twice. He gives the gift of life back to his friend, Lazarus, and two strangers – the widow’s son and the daughter of Jairus. Jesus gave the gift of peace to his frightened followers when they were caught in a storm on the Lake of Galilee; he gave the gift of sight to a blind man, and the gift of legs to a paralyzed man. Jesus gave the gift of forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery, and to his best friend, Peter, who denied him three times.

But Christ’s best gifts were given as parting gifts in the wake of his resurrection. In those days before he returned to his Father, Jesus drew close to those who love him, empowering them with the Holy Spirit, in order that this disciples might never be spiritually apart from him. But more than just the Spirit, Christ gave lives of purpose to those who believed in him, and we see this nowhere more clearly than in the original ending to the gospel of Mark.

The gospel of Mark is the shortest and earliest of the gospels, written no more than ten to 20 years after Jesus’ ascension. Mark also has two distinct endings. The one we normally read was added later and became a part of the gospel’s tradition, but earlier sources end the book immediately after Jesus resurrection: “So they went out and fled from the tomb. for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward, Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”

What a parting gift for us to receive – “the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” It is for that gift that this church was built many generations ago, and it is for that gift that Trinity still stands today. It is for that gift that the choir sings

and the missions happen. It is for that reason that the classes are taught and meetings are held. It is for that reason, and that reason alone, that we baptize children, and it is for that reason that we, with the parents, make promises to God and to those children. The parting gift of the proclamation of eternal salvation was the reason you called a new senior pastor, and it is the reason that God has brought us together. The purpose of your life and my life is to proclaim the salvation of Christ, and where would we be, you and I, without that purpose?

In 2009, Adolf Merkle was the 94th richest man in the world, with a personal fortune worth more than 10 billion dollars. Merkle, a German citizen, lived with his wife and four children in a small village in southwestern Germany. On a Monday he left his family, telling them that he needed to make a brief stop at his office. Instead Merkle drove to a railway embankment, and a few minutes later threw himself under a passing train, leaving a note for his family that simply said, "I'm sorry." Merkle's business empire had suffered in the recession, but international banks had loaned his corporation the needed money to weather the economic downturn. It wasn't enough, however. Merkel feared he would lose everything, and it was that fear that drove an otherwise healthy man with a seemingly ideal life to end it. Without money, his life would have no purpose, and the mere prospect of such a possibility drove the 96th wealthiest man in the world into a state of absolute despair.

That is why Christ gave us his parting gift of proclaiming his life to the world. For we who believe in the Son of God, our lives always have a purpose. In the very trials and conflicts of life itself, Christ uses us to proclaim hope and salvation to others, and that is why every day of life for the believer, while it may not be a good one, is always a meaningful one. We need not be saints, popes, ministers, or prophets to receive Christ's parting gift - all we need do is just participate in the life of Christ. That is what you and I have done together these past two years, and it is what we will continue to

do, no matter the distance and no matter the circumstances. If I am to leave one gift to you this morning, let it be this thought, written centuries ago by Theresa of Avila, and given to us this day as a parting gift:

“May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us.”

Amen.