

December 24, 2011 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
2 Samuel 9 *Christmas Stories: The Undeserved Gift Story* by Andy McDonald

Here we are and it is Christmas Eve once again. Kids I want to, just for a moment talk to your parents and people their age or older of something you just can't know quite yet. You kids are familiar with how a month ago around Thanksgiving it seemed like it was forever until Christmas. I was visiting with a friend at Rotary this week who has a young daughter, and he was telling me that each day he has been reminding her of how many days until Christmas, and she asked him, "How many sleeps will it be?"

The younger we are the longer it seems to take to get to Christmas. For us older folks what can help slow the progress of time a little is to buy a special gift, a super surprise something for someone special and wrap it early and that having to wait till Christmas for the gift to be opened will help slow time down. But we adults know that the 366 days until Christmas 2012 will fly by at Blue Angels speeds and we will all too soon be right back to Christmas Eve once again.

And knowing how fast the time will fly you'd think we'd be more prepared for Christmas. That like the small percentage of pro-shoppers we would be on the lookout all year for the perfect gift for each recipient on our list but most of us will wait longer than is wise. This week as I wrapped and prepared for the Priority mailing of gifts to my mother I'm fearful that even as Priority packages they might not arrive by today for opening tomorrow.

Too much of Christmas is about purchasing the right gift for each person on our list. And part of the discomfort of receiving a gift is the question of whether or not we deserve it! And we struggle. Is the gift I'm buying big enough without being too big but not so small as to be thought too insignificant.

Maybe it's never happened to you but it probably has. Your sibling or friend mails your gift on the same day you mail theirs. Somewhere in Mailing world the two ships pass in the night. And when you open what was sent to you it becomes immediately evident that you just received a way nicer gift than the one you sent. Now what?

The giving of a gifts and the idea of "reciprocity" has created some uncomfortable feelings: This has been captured well in this clip from the sitcom Big Bang Theory a show about this group of genius scientists who lack social skills and their neighbor Penny, who is a regular person, certainly no genius, but who does have more fully functional social skills. In this scene she is presenting Christmas gifts.

Video(basically she offers a gift and Sheldon says to her that while she thinks she's giving him a gift what she is giving is an obligation. Now he feels he must go out and search for a gift of approximately equal value and of a nature as to be commensurate with the level of their friendship. She assures him that's not necessary but he's not convinced)

Somehow somewhere along life's journey we have come to believe that it is necessary for us to deserve what we are given. Maybe we don't earn the gifts directly but peripherally we have performed at some level that makes us worthy to receive the gift, that we deserve what we find wrapped under our tree.

We've been good little boys and girls, or big boys and girls.

We've done our chores.

We've obeyed.

We've been tolerant of other's poor behavior.

We've carried our end of the bargain.

So the truth is whether it's a bonus at work or gift under the tree we may feel like, "Sure it's a gift, I didn't have to buy it myself, but I earned it." And even purchasing the gift for family or friend we may size the gift according to our judgment on "naughty or nice>"

But if you look up the word “gift” the primary definition is: something given or bestowed a present. And then if you look up “give” the very first definition is: “to hand over without cost or exchange; present as a gift.”

To say someone deserves what they get means somehow they are worthy of or merit what they receive, so to say I deserve that gift is to diminish the nature of the gift. True gifting is the decision of the giver independent of what the recipient deserves or merits.

We see this played out in a great Bible story.

The primary character in our story for today from 2 Samuel 9, was clear that the only way to preserve his life was to hide out. When the new king had come to power it wasn't safe to be related to the outgoing king's family. In those days it was a common practice to destroy the descendants of the previous monarchy to prevent a future challenge to the throne.

His dad had been a fine warrior, he had been next in line to be king. But in a battle both his grandfather, the king and his dad, the heir apparent, had been killed. I don't know if there were siblings. It is likely there were but by the time we pick up the story he is the only surviving heir to the throne.

There were friends of his family—those still loyal to the former regime, who had opened their home to this surviving prince. He had found a place of refuge and safety in the home of Makir son of Ammiel in nowhere's-ville. It was an out of the way off the beaten track, uninteresting to the new royal family living in the capital. Lo-debar might have been the proverbial Timbuktu—remote, distant, obscure.

It was important to be well hidden, because unlike his father and grand father, Mephibosheth could hardly defend himself as he was crippled. When he'd first come to Makir's home he lived in fear. Would the new king search him out for execution. Whenever anyone out of the

ordinary would come to the little town of Lo-debar, Mephibosheth would get jumpy. But over time he began to relax. Like a person in the witness relocation program he simply took on more and more of persona of a member of Makir's household. In time he married and had a son named Mica, and life was okay, really pretty good for a crippled guy in that culture.

Mephibosheth had no idea that down in Jerusalem King David has brought the kingdom pretty well under control and one that day his mind carries him back to great memories of his friend, actually his brother in law too, who was better to him than the brothers in his own family.

Jonathan knew David would be king and one day David promised Jonathan that he would show kindness to any surviving family of Saul. When David remembered his promise he inquired if there were any surviving members of Saul's family and he discovers that one of Jonathan's sons is still alive, but he is crippled.

Now David had said he was investigating because he wanted to show God's kindness to any descendants of Saul anyway he could.

But when the delegation from Jerusalem arrived in Lo-debar I imagine that poor Mephibosheth was sure this was it. On the journey to the king's palace he heard the turning of chariot wheels as progress to his execution.

When he arrives he bows low in great fear and said to David, "I am your servant." What are his choices. He can't run on his crippled legs. He can't fight.

But David said, "Don't be afraid! I've asked you to come so that I can be kind to you because of my vow to your father, Jonathan. I will give you all the land that once belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you may live here with me at the palace."

All these years in fear.

All these imagined horrors at the hand of David
All those nights of wishing for different parents

And Mephibosheth falls to the ground before the king and cries out
“Should the king show such kindness to a dead dog like me?”

Well Saul’s land was restored to Mephibosheth and from that time on
Mephibosheth ate regularly with David, as though he were one of his
own sons.

It really didn’t matter what Mephibosheth got David for his birthday, or
any gift giving celebration. There was no matching proportionate,
payback gift that Mephibosheth could ever present to King David.

The only proper response was to say thank you I accept the gift.
It is the story of an undeserved gift, and it is our story. No matter how
fit we feel, no matter how capable our capacity, no matter how clever
an illusion we have built, the reality is that apart from the saving work
of that Baby born in Bethlehem we are all undeserving cripples living
in no-where’s-ville! We can’t begin to do enough good stuff, present
enough valuable gifts, live ever more perfect lives to where we put
God in our debt, where he would owe us, where social protocol would
oblige him to give us a certain gift because we “deserve” because we
are worthy of or have merited it.

One of the clearest contrasting pictures of someone sure they merit the
gift (which remember devalues it as a gift) and someone who is clear
they have no merit to barter, is Jesus story of two worshippers.

We find the story in Luke 18:9-14

“Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the
other was a dishonest tax collector.

The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer:

‘I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially
like that tax collecto over there! For I never cheat, I don’t sin, I don’t

commit adultery, I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’ What he was telling God was how deserving he was. How God really owed him. How fortunate God was to have him on the team. That anything God might give him he’d already earned.

In contrast the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’

What he was saying is--

I’m not worthy

I merit nothing

I only deserve wrath

My only hope is in your mercy—based upon who I am and what I’ve said yes to and no to earns me nothing positive. You owe me nothing!

Jesus shocked his listeners because he said “this sinner, not the self-righteous Pharisee, went home justified before God.

I’m fascinated that in Luke the very next passage is “Let the little children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, anyone who doesn’t have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God.”

Tomorrow or tonight depending on your family traditions, when a young child presents something they made for mom or dad chances are that in and of its’ self there is little if any value.

That finger painting isn’t really saleable. All the supplies that created that woven pot holder didn’t really come from the child. That Christmas ornament a child created might be a significant mismatch to the perfectly decorated tree.

But it is the purity of the joy and love behind the gift that thrills a parent and may even bring a tear of joy to the eye. At the best moment that child isn’t bartering, isn’t trying to merit something, isn’t under the

illusion or even the temptation to try and put their parent in their debt so as to deserve what they will open.

All that crassness, all that tit-for-tat gift giving, all the illusion that we can deserve a gift comes with time. As we move from childhood into the adult world we become concerned with reciprocity and that which was meant to be a joyful fulfillment of Christ's teaching that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" becomes obligation, performance, merit making.

We even may act that way with God. Thinking that if I can obey, if I can sacrifice, if I can give sufficient to him then I can earn his favor. But like the best of parents the joy is not in the gift but in the relationship with the giver.

Maybe if we could grasp God's gift to us we could relax a little, Take the pressure off "holding up our end of things," Maybe we'd recognize that God's gift that first Christmas is so huge, so eternity altering, so game changing, so unselfish and pure love that we can never reciprocate.

For Jesus to let go of his position, power, privilege and to come quietly falling from heaven into our world, to come to retrace the steps where our primal parents fell, and to reset the universe, to reconcile all things to God, and when that truth penetrates our hearts and minds it is recognized to be such an undeserved gift.

There's no payback. All our obedience, all our performance, all our gifts to God must only be expressions of love. Our scribblings. Our most creative and special gifts possible really pale to utter insignificance in the light of his gift to us of himself. And that is what he wants—not our gifts, not our foolish attempts to merit his favor, he wants us just like a parent wants to be with their child.

And if we bring ourselves home to him, if we cry out O God be merciful to me a crippled dead dog sinner, it is his joy to say welcome home, I have reconciled you to me, all that I have is yours, enter into my joy it is all my gift to you, a great and wonderful undeserved gift.

Paul wrote it so well in his letter to the Ephesians 2:8
God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." Yes it is, a great and wonderful and undeserved gift and all we can do is say thanks, I don't deserve it but thank you for the best Christmas present ever.