

“For” or “With”

January 5th, 2020 — Selby & Empey Hill — Scripture: John 1:1-14

By Rev. Mike Putnam

I'm going to describe three familiar scenes. As you listen, I want you to think about what they all have in common?

The first is a relationship with a difficult family member. Let's say it's your father.

You need to find the perfect gift. As Christmas approaches, you spend some time in the stores, you flip through the flyers, and you browse online, but nothing seems just right.

Meanwhile, everyone else on your list has a gift wrapped and ready under the tree, but you just can't seem to settle on the perfect gift for your father.

This bothers you because deep down it feels like your inability to know what present will make him happy is in some way symbolic of your whole relationship.

In the end you spend more than you meant to on something you don't really believe he wants, pathetically trying to throw money at the problem. When Christmas Day comes your father opens the present, but his smile is forced, and his thanks doesn't feel very satisfying. You've failed yet again to do something for him that might overcome the chasm between you.

Here's the second scene. You've invited friends over for New Years Eve night. You want everything to be just perfect for them. You go into a frenzy of shopping, cleaning and cooking. You're anxious that something will not turn out just right, so you turn your kitchen into your own little empire.

You barely step foot in the living room the whole night. As you say goodbye to them at the end of the night, you say, "It's such a shame we never really got to talk." When they have finally left, you collapse, frustrated and exhausted.

Here's the third scene. You feel there's something empty or lacking in the usual Christmas gift ritual with family and friends. It's not like people their age really need more stuff anyway. So, this year you feel you need to do it all differently. This year, recognizing that there are so many who are going without, who live in crippling poverty, who live in isolation or grief, you decide you can't bear to do the material Christmas as usual another year.

This year, instead of giving the usual presents, you turn all your Christmas gifts for family and friends into vouchers representing your support for goats, chickens or water

filters for people who need these resources more than your friends and family do. But even as they seem to appreciate your gesture, it still feels like something's missing.

What do these three scenes have in common? I want to suggest to you that they're all based on one tiny word: it's the word "for."

When we care about people, we want to do something "for" them. When we want our houseguests to enjoy their visit, our impulse is to spend our time together doing things "for" them. When we feel our relationship with our father is not all it could be, our instinct is to do something "for" him that somehow melt his heart and makes it all alright.

And those gestures of "for" matter because they sum up a whole life in which we try to make relationships better, try to make the world better, try to be better people by doing things "for" people.

These acts of service make us feel noble. Like Bryan Adams sings, "Everything I do – I do it for you." So, we cook for, we buy for, we offer charity for...

But there's a problem here. All these gestures are generous, and kind, and in some cases sacrificial and noble. And in a sense, that's what following Jesus is all about. But despite they're good intent, they can never get at the heart of

the problem.

You can give your father the perfect gift, but the chasm will still lie between you. You can wear yourself out showing hospitality to your guests, but you'll never actually get to enjoy a meaningful conversation with them. You can make all kinds of fine gestures of charity, but the poor are still strangers to you.

You see, "For" is a fine word, but it doesn't deal with the problem. "For" can't dismantle resentment. "For" doesn't overcome misunderstanding. "For" doesn't deal with alienation. It doesn't overcome isolation.

And most of all, "For" isn't what God shows us Christmas is all about. Because God doesn't set the world right at Christmas. God doesn't package up blessings upon us and then get annoyed when we fail to get sufficiently excited about it all.

Because "For" isn't what God shows us at Christmas. And yet, on some level, I suspect in some sense, we may all feel a sense of disappointment this year, because we've been convinced that Christmas is all about the word "for."

But at Christmas, God shows us something very different. This morning in John's prologue we heard, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us." It

doesn't seem like a very different word, but when you think about it, it's entirely different.

John begins by saying, "The Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God...Without him not one thing came into being." In other words, before anything else, there was a "with." Perhaps "with" is the most basic thing we can say about God.

And then, think about how Jesus concludes his ministry. His very last words in Matthew's gospel are, "Behold, I am with you always." In other words, "There will never be a time when I am not "with" you."

And then, at the very end of the Bible, when the book of Revelation describes life after life, in the world after the world, it says, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them and be their God."

See, maybe we've stumbled upon the most important word in the Bible. "With." The word that describes the very heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us.

In a way, "with" is a harder word than "for." Because you can do "for" without a conversation, without a real relationship, without upsetting your well-ordered life to accommodate someone else. But "with" forces you to do things differently.

See, the reason that the Christmas present for your father is doomed isn't because there's anything bad about it, it's because the only real solution is for you and father to be with each other long enough to have a heart to heart conversation and to share your stories and tease out the countless misunderstandings that have led to your broken relationship.

The reason you collapse exhausted and annoyed after your guests leave is because the hard work is finding out how you can share the responsibilities and genuinely be with one another.

What's the difference between regular charity and Christian charity? Regular worldly charity seems a little hollow, not because it isn't helpful in some sense, but because what the world needs most is not gifts of money but faithful presence of someone who really cares about those who suffer.

In other words, "with" that might actually do what "for" could never do.

Can I let you in on a little secret? I know you're dreading all this talk of "with" on some level, because I am too. "With" is hard. It's tiring. It's sometimes asks more of us than we can possibly handle on our own.

As a minister, as much as I find it meaningful to be "with"

people in their challenges, it wears me out. It makes me tired. It makes me short with my own family. Despite the fact, that we Christians are called to be people who are radically “with,” none of us has the resources to do it enough or to do it perfectly.

And that’s why it’s such glorious, almost incredible, good news that God didn’t settle on “for.” As we pack up Christmas for another year, maybe feeling a little exhausted by all the “with” that we’ve experienced over the last little while, we know that God said unconditionally, “I am with.” “Behold I am with you always.” “My name is Emmanuel; God who is with.”

Sure, there’s certainly an element of “for” in Jesus’ life. He was for us when he healed and taught, he was for us when he died on the cross, he was for us when he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven. These are things that only God can do “for” us.

But the things that Jesus did “for” us, are meaningful because he was first “with” us.

And how do we celebrate this reality? We become people who know that “for” can never change the world the way we need, unless it is closely accompanied by a “with.”

Most of the time we wish

God would just “fix it.” That’s often the nature of our prayers, right? “O Lord, heal...” “O God, deliver...” “Father, give them...” And sometimes God’s answer is a “for,” but sometimes it’s not. Sometimes, it’s better. “I am with you.” Instead, God invites us to go deeper, to take a risk, and to be in the mess “with” Him. God chose to do it with us.

And so today, we will break bread and drink wine in remembrance of the cost of the radical “with-ness” of God. We will gather at His table to receive the gift, to receive his hospitality, to receive his world redeeming act of love. But most of all, to be reminded in the most intimate way that He is “with” us. That’s the amazing good news of the word “with.”

Thanks be to God, Amen.

