

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

December 15, 2019

The Art of Unwrapping

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Hey, welcome to National Community Church, all seven campuses. The countdown to Christmas is on T minus 10 days, but who's counting? I'm so excited about our Christmas Eve services at our Capitol Hill campus 4:00 and 5:30. Rumor has it we will have a live nativity for little kids and big kids like me, okay, hot chocolate. A little bit late for your Christmas card, but we will have a photo booth and great opportunity to invite friends, invite neighbors, cannot wait for Christmas Eve.

Well, this weekend we kick off a new series 'Unwrapped'. If you have a Bible, you can turn over to the book of Ephesians. We'll meet there in a minute.

Like many of you, the Batterson family has a well choreographed ritual when it comes to opening gifts on Christmas day. We start with the youngest in the family and then we take turns going around the circle. Now, this was many years ago, I think Parker was probably 10 years old at the time. Lora and I were pretty excited about the gift that we got that year, it was a new game system that he was not expecting and we decided to sequence our gifts strategically. And so we had him open a new game for the new game system first thinking it would tip him off. It actually had the opposite effect. He assumed that we got him the wrong kind of game and this was a fair assumption based on our track record when it comes to gaming systems and so nothing worse than failing your kid on Christmas day. There was this profound disappointment that descended upon our 10 year old son. We felt like the Grinch who stole Christmas. Well, I winked at Lora and we decided to kind of play along a little bit, so sorry, can't believe it, we can return it. Well, we went around the circle and when it was Parker's turn again, of course this time he opened the new game system and it was like the hallelujah chorus. It was like he traded the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. It was just one of those... And he did this Lambeau leap across our living room landed in Lora's lap. It will forever be one of the greatest gift giving moments in our family history.

When you're a kid, Christmas is all about getting gifts. When you're a parent, oh, Christmas is all about giving gifts and there is no greater feeling than giving a great gift. Now I think I got the joy of gift-giving from my mom. Typically its kids who beg their parents to tell them what they got them. Am I right? In our family it was the exact opposite. My mom would ask me if she could tell me what she got me. Now I know this sounds totally messed up. Welcome to my world, but my mom loved to give gifts and she could hardly wait for us to receive them. I have to wonder if that's how her heavenly Father felt on that first Christmas morning.

*Luke 2:12 says, "This this will be the sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

Very simple thought this weekend, God loves giving gifts and he's really good at it. This is who God is. This is what God does.

*"No good thing will God withhold from those who walk uprightly before him." Psalm 84:11.*

*"If you then though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him?" Matthew 7:11*

*"Every good and perfect gift comes from above coming down from the Father of heavenly lights." James 1:17*

And so God loves giving gifts. He's really good at it. I'm not so sure that we're good at receiving them. His greatest gift came gift wrapped in swaddling clothes. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."* Emmanuel, God with us. This is joy unspeakable. This is peace that passes understanding, but that gift, like every gift has to be 'Unwrapped' and there you have the title of this series.

What I want to do this weekend is talk about the art of unwrapping gifts. How does that sound? Okay. Ephesians 2:8 here we go. *"For it is by grace, (by grace) that you have been saved through faith, (through faith), and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast."*

If you're taking notes this weekend, here's the big idea and I'll put it on the screen. Religion is spelled D. O. - do. Christianity is spelled D. O. N. E. done. Religion is all about what we can do for God. Christianity is all about what God has done for us in Christ. Those are two very different approach paths to God and only one of them will get you to God. The gift that Paul references in this passage is the little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. It's the gift of salvation. It's the gift of right relationship with God. It's the gift of God with us, God for us, God in us. Question is how do we unwrap that gift? Well, there are two prepositional phrases in this passage that I want to unpack this weekend. Everyone say by grace and then why don't we try this through faith.

Those two prepositional phrases by grace and through faith are two tenets of the Protestant reformation and you could call them core beliefs. One is 'sola gratia' by grace alone and the other is 'sola fide' by faith alone.

Now we'll start with grace, we'll finish with faith, but let me put a little frame around this first. It's one of my favorite scenes and one of my favorite movies, Princess Bride. Vizzini, the Sicilian mastermind employed by Prince Humperdinck to kidnap Buttercup uses the word inconceivable one too many times. His sidekick Inigo Montoya says you keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means. This is true of many words that we find in scripture.

When our extended family gets together over the holidays there are a few group games that are fan favorites. Good chance we'll play Mafia or Psychiatrist, but my personal favorite is Dictionary. Now it's basically Balderdash, but we play it with an actual dictionary. Here's how it works. Someone finds a word that no one knows. Write down the real definition, then everybody else makes up their own definition. And you get one point if you guess the real definition and you get one point, if someone guesses your definition, good times. What I want to do this weekend is play a little dictionary because I think there are some words that we use that we make

up our own definitions and they do not mean what we think they mean. So I want to go back to basics. I want to go back to the Bible and I want to redefine what I think are two of the most important words in our vocabulary as Christ followers. And I think it will help us unwrap this gift that God has given us.

Let's talk about 'by grace' first. It is 'by grace' that you have been saved. Now we tend to think of grace and mercy as being the same thing, but really they are two sides of the same coin. Let me define grace by delineating the difference. Mercy is not getting what you deserve and that's wonderful. When you don't get what you know you had coming to you, that's a good feeling. Grace is something different; grace is getting what you do not deserve. And so what you have are two things that are both amazing in their own right. Now, grace in its simplest form is unmerited favor. You cannot qualify for it. That's what unmerited means. By definition, it's something you don't deserve and that's hard for us to accept. We'd rather earn it, we'd rather deserve it, but it does not work that way. Grace is all God. It's not 99% God, 1% us. I want partial credit, but we don't even enter the equation. Listen, grace is all God. The NLT says you can't take credit for this. The ESV says this is not your own doing.

Now let me say this, I am type three on the Enneagram, which means I'm a performer. I am also type A. So I'm a type three, type A person. And what that means is I like earning things. I like accomplishing things. I want to do amazing things for God, but you know what I've found? It's not my job. My job is to consecrate myself to God and then let God do amazing things for me. And this is so counterintuitive. This is like one of those Chinese finger traps. You know what I'm talking about? The harder you try, the more you get trapped. And I think this is how we get stuck spiritually. We try harder and then if that doesn't work, what do we do? We try even harder. At some point you got to let go and let God, you've got to lean into God's grace.

In his memoir, 'The Sacred Journey' Frederick Buechner writes about a traumatic experience in his childhood. When he was just a young boy, his father committed suicide, and it was devastating on so many different levels. Some of you have experienced that kind of trauma and you know it's not something you get over, but it is something that you can get through with God's help. Frederick Buechner describes his own healing process in that book and he does it with such beautiful language that I felt like I just needed to share it. I'll put it on the screen. He said; "When it comes to putting broken lives back together - the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do - to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worse - is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still."

There is a little line of lyrics that I keep coming back to this year. It's the second verse of a hymn written by Martin Luther. I think it's his magnum opus. Mighty Fortress Is Our God. The first line of the second verse says this; "Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing". I can't tell you how many times the Holy Spirit has reminded me of that this year. I'll be honest, I think I tried too hard a few times and I forgot about God's grace. "Not by strength, not by power, but by my Spirit, sayeth the Lord".

And then the last line of this second, first, I love it. It points us right back to Jesus Christ and it says "he must win the battle" and the good news is he already has. It's so hard to rely on God's

grace. We want to be self sufficient and we actually think that self-sufficiency is spiritual maturity and it's the opposite. Listen, I've got some good news this weekend. His grace is sufficient. No matter what challenge you face, no matter what circumstance you find yourself in, God's grace is sufficient and I'm believing this weekend for an extra measure of grace in your life.

One more thought. The first tenant of the Westminster catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. It's the enjoying part that I'm not so sure we're good at. Question, how much are you enjoying God? How much are you enjoying that relationship? Because I think that may be the true measure of spiritual maturity. And that's the problem with religion, people are so busy trying to qualify for God's grace, something they cannot qualify for to start with or trying to get themselves into God's good graces with good works that they get it all wrong. The gift of salvation is only unwrapped in one way - by grace, by grace. And all you have to do is receive it through faith. So let's talk about that.

Over the years I shared quite a few definitions of faith. I think faith is the willingness to look foolish. I think faith is the process of unlearning fear. I think faith is in a practical sense, setting God-sized goals. I think faith is putting God between you and your circumstances. I think faith is taking the first step before God reveals the second step. And this one I borrowed, but I'm not sure from whom faith is, climbing out a limb, cutting off the branch and watching the tree fall down. I kind of like that one. Now I think faith is all of those things. But let's go back to basics. It is by grace that you have been saved through faith. And so faith is the catalyst. Faith is the conduit. It's the way we unwrap God's gifts, whether we're talking about the gift of salvation or the gifts of the Spirit. It comes from this Greek root *peitho* and *Peitho* was actually the Greek goddess of persuasion. It means to put your complete confidence in someone or something. It means to find favor, to gain goodwill. But there's one more meaning that I want to kind of poke at a little bit. It means to bind.

Now, think of atoms binding to one another and forming a compound. When you bind sodium and chloride, which you end up with, is sodium chloride or table salt. I think faith is the way that we bind ourselves to God and it catalyzes this spiritual reaction, chain reaction in our lives. In that moment that we put our faith in Christ, some unbelievable things happen simultaneously. Our sin is forgiven and forgotten. Our adoption papers signed, sealed, and delivered. A Holy Spirit takes up residence within us. Name written in the Book of Life. Curse of sin is broken. The blessing is bestowed. And that's the tip of the iceberg.

Let me paint a little picture. There is a feature on the iPhone and I wouldn't call myself the most proficient iPhone user. I text with one thumb. Lora makes fun of me. Pray for me. Okay. There's a little feature on the iPhone that's called airdrop. It lets you transfer files, transfer photos, and of course it lets you do this wirelessly via Bluetooth, pretty unbelievable, would've been an amazing magic trick just 50 years ago. Here's the way it works. You've got a launch control center. You long press the wifi button and then you tap airdrop and you determine who can airdrop, contacts, everyone. And voila pictures magically appear out of thin air. I think that that is a wonderful picture of faith. It's the way that things are wirelessly transferred in God's economy. It's a way that we unwrap God's gifts. We air drop them by faith.

Now the technology is new, but the idea is as old as Abraham. Romans 4:3 says, "*Abraham believed God*". Same word right here - peitho. Abraham believed God and it was credited to his account as righteousness. Now that word credited is the Greek word logizomai and it means to count, to compute, to calculate. It's an accounting word and essentially it's balancing the books at the end of the year. It literally means to pass to one's account and metaphorically, I think it's a wireless transfer. It's an airdrop.

Now, I've already said that religion is spelled do. Christianity is spelled done. And we know this, but I probably need to say it again because we get this backwards all the time. We think that righteousness is doing something right. Right? Wrong. It's all about the righteousness of Christ being airdropped to our account.

Now, let me come at this from a couple angles. The first angle is John 19:30 Jesus is hanging on a cross and scripture records his last words. "*It is finished!*" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. Now I say last words, but it's really one word in the Greek 'tetelestai'. And it's another accounting term. In fact, archeologists have actually found ancient receipts with this word written across them. It means paid in full, but it's actually a little bit better than that. It's actually the final installment on a debt owed. In other words, after tetelestai, you are debt free.

Now, II Corinthians 5:21 says this, "*that God made him who had no sin to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of Christ.*"

I think there are two airdrops that happen in this passage. When we confess our sin, our sin is airdropped to Christ's account. First John one eight and nine says it this way; "*If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Now the technical term is justification and since we're defining words, I think one of my favorites is 'just as if I had never sinned.' How wonderful is that? And so it's this idea that our sin is paid in full and so that's the first airdrop. The sin debt paid in full at Calvary's cross, it is finished tetelestai, we don't owe a blame thing. Unbelievable, right? The incredible thing is that that's only half the gospel.

You've got to flip this coin because there's a second airdrop where this righteousness of Christ is then airdrop to our account. In other words, everything that Christ did right, we get credit for. And then God says, why don't we just call it even? This is the gospel. This is the good news. Faith is the way that we long press that button. Faith is the way that we download the promises of God. Faith is the way that we unwrap the gifts of God.

Let me bring this thing in for a little landing. What is the gift of salvation? I mean, those are ancient words that don't usually come up in the course of weekly conversation, right. And so let's make sure we understand what this is. It's right relationship with God. It's not super complicated. It's God with us, God for us, God in us, but I want to add one more thing to the mix this weekend. I am loving Colossians 1:27. I am loving it. I am living it. I think it's one of my favorite verses right now. It says that a mystery was hidden for ages and generations that has now been revealed to us. I mean, what a setup right there, right? Well, what is that mystery? It says; "This mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Now this is going to sound so simple, but I'm not sure that there is anything more profound. I am in Christ and Christ is in me. Well, which is it? Oh, it's both. And that is the mystery. Galatians 2:20 Apostle Paul says, *"I've been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me; the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."* And so please hear this. Christ died for us so that he could live in us.

Now, flip that coin and the phrase 'in Christ' is repeated more than a hundred times in the New Testament. This is our true identity. This is our destiny. I am more than a conquer in Christ. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I am in Christ; Christ is in me, that is the mystery that is the hope of glory.

And I think that on one level you do have to do your human best for God. I mean, it sounds like I'm contradicting Buechner, but I think God is pleased with the best effort. But we've gotta be so careful right here because grace is letting God do his holy best for us. And this is where the battle is won or lost. This is the difference between you fighting for God and God fighting for you. You got to let God do for you, which you cannot do for yourself.

Now, Kathleen Norris said something that I've been thinking about for about 20 years, read this about 20 years ago. She said, "Modern believers tend to trust more in therapy than mystery." There is nothing wrong with therapy. I have a scheduled appointment with the counselor this coming week. Everybody needs counseling, get counseling, you need it. But therapy alone does not get us where we need to go. It's by grace through faith. It's Christ in us changing us from the inside out and it's us in Christ changing us from the outside in.

Let me close with this. In 1890 a Russian doll maker name Vasily Zvyozdochkin. Well, there was no way I was going to get that. He came up with a brilliant idea. He designed a doll within a doll within a doll, nesting dolls. Simply put, the set consists of dolls of decreasing size, placed one within another. And usually they're designed but they would probably look something like this. Now, I thought I'd have a little bit of fun. Can you even see this at our campuses? It's a little; it's going to get smaller. Okay, but you stick with me.

Now, I had half a mind to see if I couldn't draw a picture of you on here, but you woulda laughed at me and so you're going to have to use your imagination just a little bit. [Demonstrated with nesting dolls] This is you. This is Christ. And I think this is Christ in you. And then I think this is you in Christ. And so I could probably do that again.

It's funny, last weekend and we went to see the Illusionist, I feel like I should be doing something like far fancier than I just did.

The reality is this, we need more nesting dolls. Because it's not just Christ in you. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit and so it's the Spirit of God in you. And then if I'm reading Ephesians 1:28 right, it says that it calls God him who fills everything in every way. And so the Trinity is a package deal, this is father, Son and Holy Spirit somehow mysteriously, miraculously within me. This is the hope of glory. And then it's not just the fact that we're in Christ. I sure hope we are living according to the Spirit that the Spirit is all around us, leading us, guiding us, directing us. And then if you have been adopted into God's family, then you are in the Father as well. And

so I think we need seven Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit around us. Now, I don't know how that makes you feel. But it should make you feel really good because God is filling us from the inside out and God is surrounding us from the outside in.

A. W. Tozer said it better than I could. He said, “God is above, but He’s not pushed up. He’s beneath, but He’s not pressed down. He’s outside, but He’s not excluded. He’s inside, but He’s not confined. God is above all things presiding, beneath all things sustaining, outside of all things embracing, and inside of all things filling.” He said, this is the imminence of God. This is Emmanuel, God with us. This is the mystery. Christ in us, the hope of glory.

I want to invite our worship teams to come at all of our campuses and then I want to invite everybody at all of our campuses to stand. Would you stand and I want to close with a prayer this weekend, and we've done this before, but I want to do it maybe a little bit different. I love the way that the Quakers would pray with body posture and again, if you don't feel comfortable doing this, you get a pass. Okay? But if you're comfortable doing it, I think it's a wonderful way to pray. They would pray with their hands, face down, symbolizing things that they needed to let go of. My guess that you walked in this weekend, there is something you need to let go and let God, I'm pretty sure of that. And then they would, as the Spirit led, flip their hands over like this in a posture of receptivity. And there was just this moment, God, whatever you have for me; I am ready to receive it. How? By grace through faith. And so instead of me praying for you this weekend, I so enjoyed the way that Pastor Dave ended the service last week. I'm going to let you pray this prayer. I want to give you a few moments just with your hands down. You would discern what God might want you to let go. And then as you're ready and willing, just flip those hands over and let's just see what the Holy Spirit has to say. Here we go.

[Silence]

In Jesus' name, amen.