

I’m always interested to hear what people remember from sermons, and many of you who were here last Sunday commented on my reference to the Oyster Dressing I grew up with in Louisiana.

And, yes, I did make it for our Thanksgiving dinner. And it was delicious even until the third leftover!

But today, the Thanksgiving dishes have been washed and put away, and maybe you joined with the crowds on Friday or went surf-shopping online.

Are you the kind that makes Christmas lists? Asking people what they want, getting gift giving ideas, colors, sizes, some details to make the gift the just right.

I would like to add one more name to your list, one more name for doing your Christmas shopping; and that name is God.

Have you ever thought about what God wants for Christmas? I don’t think it’s ever out of season to think about what God would like from us.

I know a family who drew names for Christmas gift: Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and all the cousins. Well, the grandfather drew his own name, and he kept it!

On Christmas morning, as the family each opened their ‘name’ gift, he opened the gift with his name on it and with a sly grin on his face said it was one of the best gifts he had ever received!

What comes out of that is the question, “What if we all started doing that?”

Always looking to get what we want when we want it and really not thinking about giving to other people what they might like or need.

In fact, that’s how Paul describes us in the beginning of this letter to the Romans. He says we’re self-filled.

Or to put it in terms we might understand better; it’s not that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, but that the world is living by one big selfie-stick.

Each of us living as if it’s all about each of us. We shop just for us. The only name on our list is our own.

But Paul spends the rest of the letter describing how for us Christians, a grace-filled life replaces a self-filled life.

That’s what he says just a few sentences before our scripture lesson, he writes, as Eugene Peterson translates it in “The Message”: *Take your everyday, ordinary life...your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life...and place it before God as an offering.*

What God wants is us.

It is not the way most of us think about it, especially as we look toward Advent and getting ready for God’s gift to us.

We so often get this back-to-front and upside down, and the psalmist is reminding us that we were made by God for God.

Rick Warren sums up the idea well when he says: *If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You exist . . . by God’s (purpose) and for God’s (purpose), and until you understand that, life will never make sense...You were made for God and not vice versa and life is about letting God use you for (God’s) purposes, not using (God) for your (purposes).*

What God wants is us.

Now, this “Christmas package” looks very familiar each year.

It is neatly wrapped in seasonal decorations, with the familiar story of Mary and Joseph in the respective accounts of Luke and Matthew, the journey to Bethlehem's manger and the visit of the magi.

Slight changes in the wrapping occur from year to year, but for the most part the package looks the same.

It has the decorative bows from the prophet Micah to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God and ribboned with Jesus saying to love as I have loved you

Yes, it can be an attractive, elegant, and beautifully wrapped package, but if God wants us, it really is about the gift inside, the grace-filled life.

So, if you want to do some shopping for God's Christmas gift, here in our reading from his letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a detailed description to go on our list:

- Genuine love
- rejoice in hope
- keep the spirit's flame going
- don't quit in hard times
- pray hard
- help those in need
- show hospitality to the stranger,
- bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath
- laugh with your friends when they're happy
- and share tears with them when they're down
- as best you can, get along with everybody
- don't be stuck-up, be friends with nobodies
- and don't ride around on your high-horse
- or try to get even, God will take care of it all.

It's not a list that can be filled through Amazon Prime, and you won't find these in any of the catalogs we're drowning in this time of the year, or by surfing the internet on Etsy or eBay.

So if you remember anything from this sermon, I hope it's this: what God wants is us. If we're to go shopping for God's Christmas gift, it begins with a soul-surfing shopping trip.

Like the gift of Kayla Mueller.

Kathleen Day, her minister, long-time friend, and director of United Christian Ministries, said "Whenever someone needed help Kayla was happy to join in and didn't need to be the center of attention. She was just a humble, down-to-earth girl who liked to ease the suffering of just one person. Small, seemingly insignificant gestures of compassion did not escape her."

In December 2012 Kayla Mueller traveled to the Turkey-Syria border to provide aid to Syrian refugees.

A few months later, in August of 2013, Kayla and a friend visited a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Aleppo, Syria, to repair the hospital's Internet connection. They stayed there overnight and were taken captive the next day on their way to the bus station by the terrorist group, ISIL.

It was spring 2014 before anyone would "officially" hear from her again, in a letter she sent out through fellow captors who had been released.

An excerpt reads: *I remember mom always telling me that ... in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator [because] literally there was no one else. By God [and] by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall. I have been shown in darkness, light [and] have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness [and] surrender to God as well [and] have formed a bond of love [and] support amongst one another.*

On Feb. 10, 2015, Kayla Mueller's family received the news of her death.

Reverend Day wants her students to learn from Kayla's legacy.

She says: *“I’m going to counsel my students that anyone can respond to suffering. It’s OK if you never feel called to leave your community. You don’t have to travel the world; suffering is right before us everywhere, and we’re just called to see it...to respond to it and have an expression of joy, kindness, and advocacy for those that don’t have a voice. That’s what Kayla loved and practiced.”*

I know that we are not Kayla Mueller going to war-torn places in our world.

But I do know that each of us has been met by the love of God in Jesus Christ...that as there are burdens that weigh people down, as there are challenges that seemingly exceed our strength, as there is suffering that overwhelms our heart... that now, maybe more than ever, is a time for you and me to consider how we practice our purpose to live the love of God, to give God what God wants for Christmas, a grace-filled, not self-filled life.

It’s one of those gifts that when you go shopping, you know it when you see it, it’s just right, the gift you’ve been looking for to give to God.

So if you need some gift-giving ideas for God, I ran across this a few weeks ago, and I think he describes the kind of gift Paul writes about:

- When I’m sick and you bring me a meal, I don’t care whether you’re a Calvinist or Catholic.
- When I’m poor, and you give me some food and money, I don’t care if you’re pre-millennial or post-millennial.
- When I’m in the hospital, and you send me a prayer, I don’t care what your church denomination is.
- When you visit my grandparents in the nursing home, I don’t care what style of worship music you listen to.
- When you’re kind enough to shovel my parents’ driveway, I don’t care what translation of the Bible you read.

- When you give my friend a lift when their car breaks down, I don’t care if you’re Baptist or Methodist.
- When you help my grandmother carry a heavy load of groceries, I don’t care what you believe about evolution.
- When you’re celebrating my birthday with me, I don’t care about your views related to baptism.
- When you grieve alongside me during the death of a family member, I don’t care if you tithe or not.
- When you love me in deep and meaningful and authentic ways, nothing else really matters.

Grace-filled lives as our gift to God, we can go shopping for that today, and every day.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.