

“GIFT-WRAPPED IN MYSTERY”

1 Corinthians 15:51-57 (p. 1117)

I can't read that passage without smiling because it reminds me of a certain church nursery. Someone with my strange sense of humor had placed over the nursery door a sign that read: "*Lo, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.*" Well, it's no mystery, of course, that infants will "all be changed" – and often. But obviously Paul was writing about an altogether different sort of change; a kind of change that is a profound mystery.

Paul was evidently looking for words to describe the indescribable; the fact that, when we die, eternal life eclipses everything that we think life could possibly include. Then he hits on a symbol, and it's a symbol that seems particularly appropriate to this Christmas season. In verse 53 he writes, "*...the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*"

Paul knows that we're all going to die. But he also knows about God's peremptory promise of life forever. And he knows that promise has been nailed down and secured by the Lord Jesus. But how do you describe eternal life? Paul says that one way to talk about God's gift of life in the face of death is to see our old nature "clothed" (wrapped up) in a new one. Eternal life comes to us gift-wrapped in mystery.

The reason this image seems so appropriate right now is because Christmas tells of how God did just the opposite for us. Remember the angels' message? "*Today the Savior has been born – Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign: You will find a baby wrapped up and lying in a manger.*" The angel invites us to come and see the great mystery of immortality clothed with mortality – God's Son, gift-wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a feedbox. I invite you this holy season to consider how God dared to gift-wrap himself in the mystery of vulnerability and anonymity and innocence.

I. Sometimes God's mysterious ways become clearer when we see them being played out in the lives of ordinary people. So when I try to imagine the vulnerability of God the infant it helps me to think about the ways that plain, everyday people like you and me will sometimes lay themselves on the line for another. Someone gave me this charming account of selfless kindness.

Come with me to a third grade classroom. There is a nine-year-old kid sitting at his desk and all of a sudden, there is a puddle between his feet and the front of his pants are wet. He thinks his heart is going to stop because he cannot imagine how this has happened. It's never happened before, and he knows that

when the boys find out he will never hear the end of it. When the girls find out, they'll never speak to him again as long as he lives.

The boy puts his head down and prays this prayer, "*Dear God, this is an emergency! I need help now! Five minutes from now I'm dead meat.*" He looks up from his prayer and here comes the teacher with a look in her eyes that says he has been discovered. As the teacher walks toward him, a classmate named Susie is carrying a goldfish bowl filled with water. Susie inexplicably trips in front of the teacher and dumps the bowl of water in the boy's lap.

The boy pretends to be angry, but all the while is saying to himself, "*Thank you, God! Thank you, thank you, thank you!*"

Now all of a sudden, instead of being the object of ridicule, the boy is the object of sympathy. The teacher rushes him downstairs and gives him gym shorts to put on while his pants dry out. All the other children are on their hands and knees cleaning up around his desk. The sympathy is wonderful.

But as life would have it, the ridicule that would have been his has been transferred to someone else – Susie. She tries to help, but they tell her to get out. "*You've done enough, you klutz!*"

Finally, at the end of the day, as they are waiting for the bus, the boy walks over to Susie and whispers, "*You did that on purpose, didn't you?*" Susie whispers back, "*I wet my pants once too.*"

God help us seize those opportunities to live out in our own lives the same kind of vulnerability that God was willing to risk. As you prepare your heart to celebrate once again his coming to us, consider how God's own dear Son came wrapped in vulnerability.

2. Second, when I think about how Jesus was wrapped in anonymity and laid in a manger, it makes me wonder how often God still operates that way through garden-variety Christians like you and me. Someone shared with me the story of a young man who had been to a midweek service in which the pastor talked about listening and obeying the Lord's still small voice. After the service he went out with some friends for coffee and they discussed the message. Several talked about how God had led them in different ways. It was about ten o'clock when the young man started home. And as he drove, he began to pray, "*God, if you still speak to people, speak to me. I'll listen, and do my best to obey.*"

As he drove down Main Street, he had the strangest notion to stop and buy a gallon of milk. He shook his head and said out loud, "*God, is that you?*" He didn't get a reply and headed on toward home. But the thought persisted: "*Buy a gallon of milk.*" The young man thought about how young Samuel hadn't recognize God's voice at first. He said, "*Okay, God, in case that is you, I'll buy the milk.*" It didn't seem like too hard a test of obedience. He could always use the milk. He stopped and purchased the gallon of milk and started toward home.

When he passed Seventh Street he felt the urge to turn. *“This is crazy,”* he thought and drove on. But he kept on feeling that he should turn down Seventh Street. So at the next intersection he turned back and headed down Seventh. He drove several blocks, then suddenly felt like he should stop. He pulled over to the curb and looked around. He was in a semi-commercial area of town. The businesses were closed and most of the houses looked dark.

Again, he sensed something. *“Go and give the milk to the people in the house across the street.”* The young man looked at the house. It looked like the people were either gone or they were already asleep. He started to open the car door and then sat back. *“Lord, this is insane. Those people are asleep and if I wake them up, they are going to be mad and I will look stupid.”* Again, he felt like he should go and give the milk. Finally, he opened the door. *“Okay, God, if this is you, I will go to the door and I will give them the milk. If you want me to look like a fool, okay. I want to be obedient. But if they don’t answer right away, I’m out of here.”*

He walked across the street and rang the bell. He could hear noise inside. A man’s voice yelled out, *“Who is it? What do you want?”* Then the door opened before the young man could get away. The man was standing there in his jeans and T-shirt. He looked like he just got out of bed. He didn’t seem too happy to have some stranger standing on his doorstep. *“What is it?”* The young man thrust out the gallon of milk, *“Here, I brought this to you.”*

The man took the milk and rushed down a hallway speaking loudly in Spanish. Then, from down the hall came a woman carrying the milk toward the kitchen. The man was following her holding a baby. The baby was crying. So was the man. He said, *“We were just praying. We had some big bills this month and we ran out of money. We didn’t have any milk for our baby. I was just praying and asking God to show me how to get some milk.”* His wife in the kitchen yelled out, *“I asked him to send an Angel with some. Are you an Angel?”*

Wouldn’t it be something if someone in all sincerity asked you that question? I wonder the ways God might be able to use you and me for good if we didn’t feel a need to attach our names to our acts of kindness. In this holy season of celebrating His coming to us, remember that it was like that for God. He gave himself to us in the gift of his own dear Son, wrapped in anonymity.

3. And last, I invite you to think about the innocence in which God wrapped himself in Jesus. A girl named Beth Hernandez talks about lessons on innocence that she is learning from her brother. She writes:

My brother Chuck thinks God lives under his bed. At least that’s what I overheard him say one night. He was praying in his darkened bedroom. I stopped outside his door to listen. *“Are you there, God?”* he said. *“Where are you?”* A

pause – then, in a relieved voice, “*Oh, I see. Under the bed.*” I giggled softly and tiptoed off to my own room.

Chuck’s unique perspectives are always a source of amusement. But that night something else lingered long after the humor. I realized for the first time the very different world Chuck lives in. He was born 30 years ago, mentally disabled as a result of labor difficulties during birth. Apart from his size there are few ways that he is an adult. He reasons and communicates with the capabilities of a seven year old.

I remember wondering if Chuck was ever dissatisfied with his monotonous life. Up before dawn each day, off to work at a workshop for the disabled, home to eat his favorite macaroni and cheese for dinner, and later to bed. The only change in this routine is laundry day, when he hovers excitedly over the washing machine like a mother with a newborn child. But he does not seem dissatisfied. He lopes out to the school bus every morning at 7:05, eager for a day of work; he wrings his hands excitedly while the water boils on the stove before dinner; and he stays up late twice a week to gather our dirty laundry for his next day’s chores.

And Saturdays – oh, the bliss of Saturdays! Dad takes Chuck to the airport to have a soft drink, watch the planes, and speculate on the destination of each passenger. He can hardly sleep on Friday nights in anticipation. I do not think Chuck knows what it means to be discontent. He will never know the entanglements of wealth or power, and he does not care what brand of clothing he wears or what kind of food he eats. He recognizes no difference in people, treating all as equals and as friends. His needs have always been met, and he never worries that one day they may not be.

His hands are diligent. Chuck is never as happy as when he is working. When he unloads the dishwasher or vacuums the carpet, his heart is completely in it. He does not shrink from a job, and he does not quit a job until it is finished. But when his tasks are done, Chuck knows how to relax. He is not obsessed with his work or the work of others.

His heart is pure too. He believes everyone tells the truth, that promises must be kept, and that when you are wrong, you apologize. Free from pride and unconcerned with appearances, Chuck isn’t afraid to cry. He’s always sincere and he trusts God. Not confined by intellectual reasoning, when he comes to Christ, he always comes as a child.

In my moments of doubt and frustration, I envy the security of his simple faith. Perhaps he’s not the one with the handicap. My fears, my obligations, my pride, my circumstances all become disabilities when I do not give them away to Jesus. Maybe Chuck can comprehend things I might never learn. He has spent his whole life in innocence, after all, talking to God, who lives under his bed, and soaking up the goodness of the Lord. One day, when the mysteries of Heaven are

opened, we will all be amazed at how close God really is to our hearts. But Chuck won't be surprised at all.

Consider again, in this holy season of His coming to us, that it was like that for God. He gave us the gift of his own dear Son, wrapped in childlike innocence.

This Christmas, when life get a little too busy for your own good, stop and consider again God's remarkable gift of himself: God Almighty wrapped in vulnerability; God everywhere-present and yet wrapped in anonymity; God the all-knowing and yet wrapped in innocence. It's all wrapped in mystery. And yet sometimes it's plain, ordinary people who give us the clearest illustrations of God's mysterious ways, and help us to get our hearts ready for the celebration of His birth.

αμεν