

The Power

Rev. Dr. E. Stanley
Ott

John 1:9-15

Sermon Series:
Gifts from the Heart
of God

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I love this time of year. In the midst of all of the challenges and ups and downs in life, I find the wonder of the message and music of Christmas breathes refreshment in my spirit. They remind me that our Lord is always with us and always leading us—and, of course, there are always amusing moments in the midst of the busyness of the season.

A man observed a woman in a large mall with a three-year-old girl alongside. As they passed a bakery, the child asked for a cookie and her mother told her "No." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, "Now, Ellen, we just have three more stores left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long." The same man passed the mother and daughter near a candy counter. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more stores to go, and then we'll be going home." The man again happened to be behind the pair in another check-out line, where the little girl immediately began to cry upon discovering there would be no treat purchased that day. The mother patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this cash register in five minutes, and then you can go

home and have a nice nap." The same man happened to see them in the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen." The mother broke in, "You don't understand. My little girl's name is Tammy. I'm Ellen." Now there is a mom who could use the encouragement of the Christmas season in her life. 'Tis the season to be jolly!

To prepare us for celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Pete has been leading us through a wonderful study of the Prologue, the beginning words of the Gospel of John, the words that Vince Pistilli marvelously read to us a few minutes ago. We pick up with verse 9: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [that is Jesus] He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." It's amazing when you think about it, the true light that enlightens everyone in the world, the world he made, yet the world didn't know him and his own people did not accept him. Yet, there follows this familiar verse with gigantic implications. "¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

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Now, you may think to yourself, “Oh, I know what that verse is about; I’ve heard it or read it many times,” and assume you understand it. Sometimes, familiarity keeps us from seeing all that is there.

There is a report of a psychiatric hospital in San Diego that was under investigation for insurance fraud. A group of over sixty FBI agents conducted a raid of the hospital and, after hours of reviewing thousands of medical records, the dozens of agents had worked up quite an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza parlor with delivery service to order a quick dinner for his colleagues. The following telephone conversation took place.

Agent: “Hello. I would like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.”

Pizza Man: “And where would you like them delivered?”

Agent: “We’re over at the psychiatric hospital.”

Pizza Man: “The psychiatric hospital?”

Agent: “That’s right. I’m an FBI agent.”

Pizza Man: “You’re an FBI agent?”

Agent: “That’s correct. Just about everybody here is.”

Pizza Man: “And you’re at the psychiatric hospital?”

Agent: “That’s correct. And make sure you don’t go through the front (go) to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.”

Pizza Man: “And you say you’re all FBI agents?”

Agent: “That’s right. How soon can you have them here?”

Pizza Man: “And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?”

Agent: “That’s right. We’ve been here all day and we’re starving.”

Pizza Man: “How are you going to pay for all of this?”

Agent: “I have my checkbook right here.”

Pizza Man: “And you’re all FBI agents?”

Agent: “That’s right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked.”

Pizza Man: “I don’t think so.”
Click.¹

You have to love it! I find it amusing that the FBI agent was actually telling the truth. Yet, it is natural to be like the pizza agent—to see things the way we are accustomed to seeing them and assume we understand what we see. The joy of the Prologue, the beginning words of the Gospel according to John, is that you can understand its wonderful message with a simple reading—yet, don’t assume that what you understand is all there is, because this is a gold mine and the deeper you dig, the more gold you will find.

So, we read this familiar verse with gigantic implications. “¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” There were people who did not receive

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Jesus, did not practice basic hospitality. Suppose someone comes knocking on your door. If you receive that person, it means you open the door and invite the person inside. If you don't receive such a person, you close the door in his face. Jesus speaks to us through the New Testament Book of Revelation and says, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into you and have friendship with you." John is telling us that some people did not receive Jesus, did not open the door of their lives to him—but some did, and tremendous things happened. Do you know if you have ever consciously opened the door of your life and asked Jesus in, received him into your life?

¹²"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." To receive Jesus is to believe in him, to trust him, to place your whole life in his hands. It means when you receive Jesus, you are expecting Jesus to receive you. And receive you he does, because when you receive him, believe in him, he gives you power to become a child of God. The word "power" is an interesting one. It is a word that means authority or right or privilege. It means the freedom to act and then the authority for the action.² To receive Jesus is to receive the power, the freedom, the authority, the right to become God's child. So, have you received him and so become God's child?

And what does it mean to be a child of God? Some years ago, a woman named Elizabeth Stone made the remarkable observation that, "Making the decision to have a child—it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body." When you become God's child, you become God's very heart walking around! And, in the Prologue to the Gospel of John (the first eighteen verses), we find another gigantic clue in the very first verse: "In the beginning was the Word." Now, remember, Jesus Christ is the Word and Jesus Christ is God's Child. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God." In the beginning was Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ, God's child, was with God.

Our son Lee was born in the spring of a year in which I was scheduled to spend the summer months at Princeton Theological Seminar to study New Testament Greek under one of the greatest professors of my life, Dr. Cullen Story. Ann Marie brought our son here to Arlington and stayed with my parents during those months. I would study at Princeton all week and drive to Arlington to join the family every Friday evening and drive back to Princeton every Sunday evening. One Sunday, after a great weekend with the family, I merged onto the Beltway and began heading north. I had some cassette tapes of Professor Story that I was supposed to listen to, and, although I was not much in the mood, I popped one into the tape recorder and hit play. He began talking about John

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1:1: “ In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” and I thought, Oh, man, I know all about this verse. I was something like that pizza man talking to the FBI agent assuming he understood the reality of things when he didn’t!

Dr. Story began to explain the phrase from John 1:1 that is translated in the English, "the Word was with God," that the usual word for “with” was the Greek preposition *sun* but that in his Gospel, John uses the Greek phrase *pros ton theon*, which is literally translated ‘toward the God.’ The Word was toward the God." “Jesus was toward the God.” The Word was “with God,” yes, however, not just “with” each other, shoulder-to-shoulder as you are “with” each other in the pews or with each other by living in the same home or being “with” people at work. In fact, you and I could be with one another in the same room but have no relationship with each other. I remember when Ann Marie and I were with my mother at a restaurant in New Orleans on New Year’s Eve and there were people at the tables next to us, who were in one sense “with us,” yet we had no relationship with them whatsoever, and we were not face-to-face with them. Yet, with my mom, we were “toward” her, face-to-face, delighting in each other, loving each other, enjoying each other, laughing with each other.

So, the Apostle John was not just saying Jesus was "with" God the Father in the sense of merely co-existing in heaven side-by-side.

The Word, Jesus, was and is “with God” in the sense of facing toward God; that is, the Word, Jesus, was face-to-face with God the Father.

Wow! Imagine Jesus, the child of God, the son of God and God the Father in face-to-face fellowship, face-to-face from eternity past to eternity present to eternity future, facing each other, delighting in each other, loving each other, enjoying each other, laughing with each other. That insight was so powerful, so overwhelming to me that I missed my exit for I-95 to Baltimore and practically drove around the entire Beltway!

So, when this morning we understand, “¹²But to all [and all means all] who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,” we understand that when we receive Jesus into our lives, he gives us the power, the right, the privilege, the freedom and authority to join the face-to-face relationship shared between God the Father and Jesus the Son. It means you and I may know and be known by God and know how welcome we are in God’s presence because a child is always welcomed by a loving parent.

Some time ago, a couple by the name of Tom and Janet Meade moved into West Lafayette, Indiana, where I was living at the time. They came to start a new car washing business they called The Autobath. They bought a house not far from our church and, because of its convenience, they began to worship with us each Sunday. Janet came from a Christian family and had a deep sense of what it meant to grow

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as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Tom had little understanding of what the Christian faith was all about, but he supported Janet and accompanied her and their family to church. The Meades joined a small Bible study led by Bob and Mary LaTurner that met every Wednesday evening in their home.

Bob and Mary quickly sensed the depth of Janet's faith in Christ and that Tom was unfamiliar with spiritual things. They began to build a close friendship with the Meades, and other members of the small group began to invite the Meades over socially. In the warmth of the group, Tom began to feel the freedom to ask personal and spiritual questions such as, "Who is Jesus Christ?" and "What does it mean to receive Him?" Toward the end of the group's meeting one evening, Tom said, "I have decided to receive Jesus into my life and I would like to do it with you." There, in the living room of the Laturners' home, he knelt with his group gathered around him and asked Jesus Christ to come into his life.

I have never seen a person grow spiritually as rapidly as Tom did. We became friends as we jogged together each morning and shared in a number of activities at the church. Tom ran four miles and I ran two, so he would run his first two miles and drop by my house and we would go on his final two. Time with members of his small group and other Christians was rapidly building Tom into an articulate, loving, Christian man when suddenly, he began experiencing

great pain in his lower back. Yet, repeated tests in many hospitals could find no cause.

One day, as I was sitting in a graduate class at Purdue University, there was a knock at the classroom door. I was asked to come immediately to the hospital where Tom had just undergone exploratory surgery. Janet said to me, "They found cancer in the pancreas. Would you go into his room with me to tell him?" "Of course," I replied, knowing this was a terrible diagnosis.

Tom was lying on his side in bed. As I approached him, he said "Hi, Stan. The news isn't good, is it?" I said, "No, Tom, it's not good." He said, "Its cancer, isn't it?" "Yes," I answered, "it's cancer." A pained expression came over Tom's face, and then he rolled over onto his back. Staring straight up at the ceiling, he began to speak slowly, firmly: "Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord!" Five times he said it.

The hair on the back of my neck began to prickle. I realized that Tom was no longer speaking to me. He was confessing his faith in Jesus Christ. He had not moved into our town as a God-seeker, but God had sought him. Jesus came seeking Tom until Tom became a God-seeker, who made an absolutely genuine confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Lying in that bed, Tom was with the Word with God—facing God with God facing him.

Again and again, in some very difficult and emotional moments during Tom's illness, I saw Jesus touch Tom when he had no strength or will to reach out. Tom's trust in

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Christian discipleship brought tremendous strength to Him in a very difficult moment. In the year that Tom was given to live, I watched him minister to his family and lead both his mother and one of his dear friends to Jesus Christ.³ His son, Mark, was only eleven at the time. Years later, Mark called me to say that he had just graduated from the Naval Academy and wondered what I, as a friend of his father, could tell him about his dad. So, I told him why his father was (and still is) the most courageous man I had ever met, that he loved Jesus, that he loved his mother, Janet, his sister, Christy, and him. By the end of the phone call, we were both a mess—but a wonderful mess, because I could bear witness to this young man not only of the marvel his father was among us but that one day we will join the face-to-face joy that Tom is now experiencing face-to-face with God the Father.

Have you received Jesus? If you do, he will give you the power, the right and the privilege to be God's child and to be face-to-face with our heavenly, loving Father in every moment of your life. The Lord Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart. I would like to invite you to pray with me to receive Jesus into your heart, to be God's child in face-to-face harmony with God the Father. And, if you have already asked our Lord Jesus into your heart, this is a great day to re-affirm your love for him this day before Christmas Eve. If you will look in your bulletin under the sermon title, you will see

a prayer printed. If the words of this prayer express the words of your heart, I invite you to pray these words with me now:

Lord Jesus, I ask You to come into my life. I trust You to take charge of my life and make me the kind of person You want me to be for this moment and forever. I confess my sins and I thank You for Your forgiveness and assurance of eternal life in Your name. I expect now to receive the power of the Holy Spirit that I may share this faith, strength, joy and love with others in Jesus' name.

If you prayed that prayer, the Lord Jesus has come into your life and you are a child of God right now and forever. I urge you to pray to your Lord every day. Read the Gospel of John you will find in your Bible. Join us Christmas Eve and celebrate the birth of the One who now lives in you and who, with God the Father, will always be face-to-face with you.

¹ <http://www.short-funny-stories.com/funny-stories/story-84.html>

² Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: on the word *exousia*.

³ Ott, E. Stanley, *The Joy of Discipling*, Zondervan, pp.22-24.

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