Finally beloved ….

La Verne Church of the Brethren

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Luke 2:18-19

Philippians 4:8-9

**Message:**

Today is December 26. The day after Christmas. The day so many of us are trying to figure out how to use all these Christmas presents we’ve just received into our lives. My husband is a middle school teacher so we are flush with gift cards about now. Jeff has a good relationship with his students and their families. He works hard to see each student in the best light. In return they show their gratitude through notes and emails of appreciation, and at this time of year - Starbucks cards!! Jeff makes a pot of coffee at home every morning but we sure do love to get a fancy coffee and spinach-feta wrap every now and again. And every time we treat ourselves in this way we acknowledge the giver by saying out loud something like, “Mmmmm…Thank you Johnny!”

In our entryway we have an old fashioned standing desk. One drawer is dedicated for gift cards alone. We have not figured out how to use all of them. For instance my husband is a vegetarian so we have left the BBQ and Steakhouse restaurant gift cards to sit in wait while we look up menu options and ponder how or when to use them.

For those of you screaming at your screens or firing off an email right about now - I know about the service that will convert gift cards to cash and I HAVE given the gift cards to others who can use them. But, I am also compelled by the feeling that the most important part of any gift comes from the intention with which it was given. I think about those students and families who took time to consider how they wanted to honor Jeff's time with them, and the handwritten, heartfelt notes they wrote to him. I think about these things and it feels wrong to not use them.

In both of our scriptures today we are inspired and encouraged to take time to “ponder” and “think about” gifts received and how to use them.

In the Luke text we learn about shepherds who could not wait to share what they had heard from the angels about this child born to Mary. They set out to spread the word concerning the gift that was given by God and all who heard it were amazed. All who heard it were amazed, but Mary was left to ponder, wondering, how she should respond to this gift bestowed on her - to be the mother of God incarnate. Mary treasured all of this and pondered it in her heart.

Other Biblical translations of Luke 2:19 use different language:

“Mary **remembered** all these things and thought deeply about them.” (Good News Translation)

“But Mary **kept** all these things, and pondered them in her heart.” (King James Version)

“Mary was **preserving** all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (Young’s Literal Translation).

But, in the end, I prefer the passage with the word “treasured” best. It speaks to something a little deeper. The Greek translation for “treasured,” means “kept safe” as if to protect. I know how protective I felt as a new mother - how desperately I wanted to keep safe this vulnerable new life in my arms. I was very aware of how precious this time was with my babies. I protected the time and space I had with them in order to bond and learn how to live and be in a world wholly new to me. Mary was a new mother. She treasured this awesome gift born to her — and also through her. Because this precious gift she held in her arms was a gift not for her alone. Mary took the time to treasure, to ponder and to protect this precious God given gift. A gift she was protecting for you, for me and for the whole world.

Like Mary, how we use the gifts we’ve been given depends on how we understand the intention or blessing in which they were given to us.

Within this congregation, those gathered together in our sanctuary and those of you who join us virtually both near and far - many gifts have been given. In fact, some of the ministries of this congregation with the greatest longevity came from you! Kara Evans used her gifts of creativity and adventure to begin what we know today as Peace Camp. Reba Herder used her gifts of mysticism and inclusion to launch Lenten Interest Clusters and Faith Partners. A committee of people began the Peace and Carrots Garden. Mike and Michael Wolfsen used their gifts, motivated by their own life stories to make it into a thriving, community garden. And Corlan Harrison’s passion for cooking and feeding this congregation grew into a vibrant ministry of feeding our hungry and homeless neighbors. And largely, these ministries continued during the pandemic because of generosity, in the form of financial gifts from our online community. I could tell you stories all day about the gifts given and used here at La Verne Church of the Brethren. Among you I see gifts for creating beauty and glorious music. I see leadership and gifts for coordination. I see people deeply committed to service and justice work. I see the builders, workers and caregivers. La Verne Church of the Brethren is flush with gifts!

This is the last sermon I will preach to the La Verne Church of the Brethren. So, I want to take this opportunity to encourage you to keep on, keeping on. Keep on discovering and receiving your God given gifts. Keep on using those gifts for the glory of God and your neighbors good! As you move into the months ahead and discern how to staff yourself for the future, hear these words from Phillipians 4:8-9 paraphrased by, Eugene Peterson:

Friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Mary was called to Mother the incarnation. In this time of transition, how are you being called to use your unique and God given gifts?

 Think on these things.

 Ponder these gifts in your heart.

Take time to understand and appreciate how the gifts you’ve been given compliment and magnify what is true, authentic, compelling and gracious about this work you do together for the glory of God and your neighbors good.

Finally beloved,

We are each called by Christ to share our gifts and be light for the world - enthusiastically. The Greek translation of enthusiasm is entheos. Which means, in God. Enthusiasm is not only a form of incarnation but also evidence of it. God gave the world true light. God lives in you, in me and in all of us as true light. So, take your individual and  combined gifts and enthusiastically use them to shine into the world. When you do, God will bring everything together and make it work.

May it be so. And may it be so.

Amen.