

A couple of years ago a man drove his car up to the window of a Starbucks drive-thru. He paid for his coffee, and then on a whim, he also paid for the person in the next car and drove off. That driver pulled up to the window, learned what had happened, and said, "OK, I'll pay for the person behind me." And on it went. One year ago in Bloomington IL 142 consecutive drive-thru customers bought coffee for the next person in line over a 3-hour stretch. Two weeks ago in Pompano Beach FL a man drove up to the window, and the driver behind him started leaning on the horn to hurry him up. The man decided not to get angry back; instead, he bought the guy's coffee. The angry driver was so surprised, he bought coffee for the car behind him, and the whole thing started again. Just a few days ago in Marysville WA, 1,013 consecutive customers paid for the order of a complete stranger, the person in the next car.

There is a real joy to gift-giving, especially when you expect nothing in return. In these cases, though, people gave because they had received something. They were so moved that they made a gift to a different person. This concept was made famous a few years ago in the movie *Pay It Forward*, but it was pioneered by someone else: God.

Today we celebrate the ultimate gift. God gave himself to us. We did nothing to earn this gift. We received it even before we were born. It must have given God great joy to do this.

Still, every gift comes with some expectations. All those people buying coffee were hoping the next person would do the same. When you give a gift at Christmas, you may be expecting one in return. Now, if you took part in our adopt-a-family program or made food donations to the local pantry or some other charity, you don't expect anything back. But you do hope to set off a chain reaction. We hope the people we help will help someone else.

In the Letter to Titus, St. Paul describes the birth of Jesus this way. Jesus was a gift, not a reward, but the gift came in hopes for a chain reaction. Paul says the appearance of Jesus trained us "to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age." It didn't go the other direction. God didn't wait until we had rejected godless ways and worldly desires; God didn't wait until people were living temperately, justly and devoutly. God came while we were still sinners, while we were the angry motorist, the thoughtless spouse, the ungrateful child, or the selfish priest. Our sins didn't stop Jesus from coming. He came in hopes of starting a chain reaction of goodness.

We have come tonight to receive the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, who comes to us now in the eucharist, and whose future coming we await. We receive something good so we can do something good for the next person in line. We sometimes withhold our love until a person who hurt us says "I'm sorry" or until the needy prove that they're not taking advantage of us. But that was not the spirit of the first Christmas. Jesus came in spite of our sins. God became Christ for us so that we would become Christ for others. That is the spirit of Christmas.