

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Do you have a preferred method of opening a gift?

This morning I'd like to examine *the psychology of gift opening*. There seem to be two ways to primary approaches to opening a present.

Christmas having just passed, many of us have probably witnessed both.

On one end of the spectrum we have the *the fastidious opener*; in some circles this method may be known as *the depression or "save the paper" method*. Such persons display an excessively *high need for control* in situations. My father practiced this method. I should add, this method can *be quite annoying to children* anxious to open the rest of their presents.

When my dad opened a gift, he would take out his pocket knife, *deftly cut each taped spot without harming the wrapping paper*, gently fold open the paper in reverse order of wrapping, *put his gift the side without comment or attention*, and carefully fold up the wrapping paper so that it could be used again. It took forever.

We on the other hand – and *most kids* – apply the *"damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" approach, ripping and tearing* paper, ribbons, bows or anything else that stood between us and our quarry . Let's be honest, most people prefer ripping and tearing, because when it comes to opening gifts most of us are kids at heart.

I should mention that deviant combination of the two methods. These aberrant openers *secretly use the fastidious method* to open all their

gifts in advance, and then *carefully re-wraps* each one so that they can *rip and tear on Christmas* while knowing what each gift is. In addition to *high need for control* these social deviants *demonstrates a crippling desire* to know all things before everyone else. *Perhaps you know a person of this type.* I have a brother-in-law who still does this in his 40s.

I am not trying to prolong the Christmas season; it officially ended Friday. The point of this un-wrapping business is to get at the intention of each method. Fastidious openers use their approach with the intention of being able to reuse the paper or return the gift to its previous state in the case of combo type.

Those who rip and tear – and this is what’s important – never intend to be able to wrap the gift up again; they couldn’t even if they tried. Tearing is a permanent, irreversible gesture. This is important to recognize because this is what God does at Jesus’ baptism in Mark’s gospel – God *“tears open the heavens”* – as in there is no going back, no putting the genie back in the bottle, no retreat.

St. Mark uses the word *schizomai* – “to rip or tear,” *indicating that beginning at Jesus’ baptism something changes irreversibly – access to God’s realm is open.* Matthew and Luke copy Mark’s gospel, but both change *schizomai* to *anoigo* – to open, preferring to show a more controlled gesture. Mark’s word choice suggests eagerness, passion, excitement at what’s taking place in the Jordan River. *The Father cannot contain God’s eagerness, passion or excitement because God creates a new beginning when John baptizes Jesus.*

Looking at Mark, chapter 1, it's clear that God is bringing about something new.

- Mark's first words, "*the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ*";
- *John's baptism represents the old state of affairs* – people trying by their own efforts to repair the breach between God and humanity.
- But then, *Jesus comes and the heavens are torn open*.
- The *Holy Spirit descends over the water* of the Jordan. Look at the first reading from *Genesis 1*; "*in the beginning ... the ruah* (spirit or wind or breath) *of God moved over the waters.*"
- And **what does the Father say from heaven?** "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" Doesn't it sound an awful lot like God says, "*It is good.*" – *a new day of creation*.

See, something changes that day, not just for Jesus, but for all of creation. And it's not a change that we bring about with our repentance, or earnest desire or any decision we make. God brings about the change that day when Jesus submits to a baptism of repentance He is not in need of. Jesus willingly counts Himself among we, who need to repent of our sins for forgiveness. That day in the Jordan is a beginning, and what follows – the healings, the miracles over nature, the teaching, Jesus' declarations of the forgiveness of sins – all demonstrate the new thing God begins creating that day.

Jesus' baptism is a new beginning, not just for Jesus but for all who go through those waters. Because Baptism isn't just the human act of having bathing in water as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of our sins. In Baptism God begins a new creation in each of us – a new creation, not of our own making, but from God's creative Holy Spirit as

in the beginning.

In baptism ***God declares us beloved like Jesus*** is declared beloved – says, “*They are good because I say they are.*” God’s pours out the Holy Spirit upon us as in the beginning, God begins bringing about new creation. So now ***God’s new creation sits side by side with the sinful creation that need to repent.*** We can surely repent, but we must also allow God to work new creation in us, but seeking God’s merciful assistance. This is why in many traditional prayers of confession “*we pray for the Holy Spirit for the amendment of our sinful lives.*” God can change us in ways we cannot change ourselves, but we need to submit ourselves to the creative Word of God directing our feet into Jesus’ way of peace.

Through Baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit God empowers us to become new creations. The sinfulness and need for repentance still exists, but with God’s help the new creation can shine in us more and more. In Mark’s gospel at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross a second rending occurs. This time the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom, opening again the way to live in God’s presence.

So often we are compelled to depend upon ourselves to get things accomplished, but growth in grace cannot and will not happen in this way. God chose to assist us because without such assistance, we cannot grow in love and faith towards God. We cannot do this without God’s help, but it can be done. It’s comforting to know that God like most of us, is a ripper and tearer, and that on that day in the Jordan, God opened a gift that cannot and will not be wrapped again. ***Amen !!***