

Unexpected Gifts

By Greg Miller, M.Div., D.Min. & Susie Smidt, M.A., LMFT

Christmas time is a time of giving *and* receiving gifts. We all appreciate the opportunity to both give and receive gifts from family and friends. With Christmas season here we thought that it would be appropriate to focus on *Unexpected Gifts* – the kind of gifts that let us experience grace in this season and in recovery.

Greg Miller, M.Div., D.Min., and **Susie Smidt, MA, LMFT**, of our Faithful & True family, have blessed us with following insights on the subject of *Unexpected Gifts*.

Greg writes:

During the Christmas season, one of my favorite indulgences is a Hallmark Christmas movie. I was first introduced to the channel and concept through my mother-in-law, Mary when we would watch them together. I love how simple Christmas, relationships, and life are in the fake-snow-reality of some fictional small town. There is a comfort in the predictable nature of the movies. It is a temporary distraction from the complexities of life. Even when there is a reference to death, loss, and betrayal, the pain seems to be minimal and quickly fades. In case you haven't heard this yet, life is not like a Hallmark Christmas movie. Christmas isn't even like a Hallmark movie. Relationships and families are complicated, and grief and loss are real.

One thing that can be less complicated in this season is gift giving. Wish lists have been around for a long time. We are now surrounded by electronic gift lists and gift cards. Gifts can be purchased by the click of a button. Because of this, we may get what we requested, and yet we are rarely surprised. The gift can be thoughtful, intentional, caring *and* expected.

When was the last time you were surprised by a gift? The predictable gift confirms that someone got our wish list, and the unexpected gift is a thoughtful surprise that catches us off guard.

Though predicted, the original gift of the first Christmas did not arrive in the way most expected. God became flesh because the Knowing God understood our need and expressed Divine love through a child in a most surprising way. Jesus was born into a very complex reality with death, loss, and pain. Christ's birth was not an attempt to avoid pain. Instead, the incarnation is God's gift to transform pain.

Though we may be tempted to try to simplify Christmas and life, God became flesh to meet us in our reality. As we consider gifts, may we remember the first and greatest Gift. May we hear the invitation to begin the gift giving process from a place of understanding our loved ones in their humanity and complexity, in their grief and sorrow, and in their hope and joy. Let yourself be a thoughtful gift giver. Seek to be the person who does the unexpected. Surprise the people you love with a gift that reminds them they are seen and known.

The invitation during this season is to live in the complexity of Christmas. Acknowledge the challenges, the losses, the grief, and the pain, and move towards the unexpected gift of grace that was born at the first Christmas. Complexity becomes more beautiful and hopeful through the lens of the manger.

(*And I will continue to celebrate the season by enjoying the fake snow, simple plots and happy endings of an occasional Christmas indulgence.*)

Susie added:

As I reflect on unexpected gifts during this holiday season, the first thing that comes to mind for me personally are the 2 new babies that arrived in our family 3 months ago within a day of one another and the older brother who made us grandparents less than 2 years ago. We've had the joy of watching our young adult children become parents themselves and spending regular time with all of them during extended maternity leaves this fall. It has truly been the most satisfying and enjoyable experience imaginable and has filled my cup with so very many unexpected gifts.

At Faithful & True, we have entered the holiday season with our center beautifully decorated for Christmas AND... in a season of adjustment and sadness as we get used to our new normal without our beloved co-founder, Mark Laaser. In these weeks since Mark's death, I've been filled with appreciation in a new way for the team of people I get to work alongside each day. This team has been thoughtfully and prayerfully built by both Mark and Debbie to carry on the work of helping hurting individuals and marriages to recover from addiction and betrayal and is in place and ready to serve. Because of this I feel equipped and supported in the work despite the unwelcome reality of Mark's death. It's far from what any of us wanted AND we are eager to continue doing the work.

Before entering recovery myself I didn't know how to grieve or understand why grieving was important. I'm grateful to have learned and continue to learn how to grieve well and to handle the many conflicting and sometimes confusing emotions that tend to show up in grief. I've been able to allow myself the unexpected gift of not having to have it all figured out – the grace to be where I am at and be okay with it. To take each day as it comes with intentionality but also flexibility and grace – to feel the feelings as they show up and take the time to understand what they are telling me about my needs and myself. As I encourage clients to adopt this mindset for themselves, I get to practice the same thing in my own life. This way of experiencing feelings and determining needs is a foundational recovery behavior in all seasons. The beautiful gift in recovery for me over the last 18 years is that the lessons and principles I learned in the rawest times of my own pain can and do stay with me if I allow them to; and they help me process and work through all of the challenges that are part of this life here on earth.

Many years ago, my husband, Russ, and I committed to the work of recovery in our broken lives and marriage and have experienced transformation that we didn't know was possible. While we never want to give the impression that we have "arrived" at some magical place in our marriage, this healing and transformation has been an unexpected gift to us. Along that line, on October 23rd at Mark's Memorial Service we had the pleasure of seeing many of you who have traveled a journey similar to ours and I felt very encouraged by you. You also have done the work and your marriages are not just surviving, but thriving. On that day of sadness and commemoration, you were an encouraging reminder to me – a very unexpected gift – that hope, healing and transformation are the reason we continue the work that Mark and Debbie Laaser have begun.

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