From time to time in our lives each of us are privileged to be the recipients of priceless gifts. I don't mean gifts such as gems or rare paintings or or ancient heirlooms. Any of those can be bought for a price. I mean truly priceless gifts, such as the gift of laughter, the gift of friendship, the gift of love. Unfortunately, most often we just take these gifts as they are given, without stopping to think about the value of the gift, without stopping to consider what a treasure it is that we have received. I would like to share a story with you this morning about one such woman. Wrapped up in her own thoughts and problems, she was unaware of the gift she was being given. The story is called "A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy", and was written by Mary Sherman Hilbert. She prefices her story with the following explanation:

A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy
by Mary Sherman Hilbert

Several years ago, a neighbor related to me an experience that happened to her one winter on a beach in Washington State. The incident stuck in my mind and I took note of what she said. Later, at a writers' conference, the conversation came back to me and I felt I had to set it down. Here is her story, as haunting to me now as when I first heard it:

She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of thee or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me.

She was building a sand castle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea.

"Hello," she said. I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child.

"I'm building," she said.
"I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring.
"Oh, I don't know. I just like the feel of the sand."

That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by.

"That's a joy," the child said.
"It's what?"
"It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy."

The bird went glissading down the beach. "Good-bye, joy," I muttered to myself, "hello, pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

"What's your name?" She wouldn't give up.
"Ruth," I answered, "I'm Ruth Peterson."
"Mine's Windy." It sounded like Windy. "And I'm six."
"Hi, Windy."
She giggled. "You're funny," she said. In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on.

Her musical giggle followed me. "Come again, Mrs. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

The days and weeks that followed belonged to others: a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, an ailing mother.

The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwater. "I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat.

The never-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed. I had forgotten the child and was startled when she appeared.

"Hello, Mrs. P," she said. "Do you want to play?"
"What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance.
"I don't know. You say."
"How about charades?" I asked sarcastically.

The tinkling laughter burst forth again. "I don't know what that is."
"Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face.
"Where do you live?" I asked.
"Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages. Strange, I thought, in winter.

"Where do you go to school?"
"I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation."

She chattered little-girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Windy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed.

Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood even to greet Windy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home.

"Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Windy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today." She seemed unusually pale and out of breath.
"Why?" She asked.

I turned on her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" - and thought, my God, why was I saying this to a little child?
"Oh, she said quietly, "then this is a bad day."
"Yes, and yesterday and the day before that and - oh, go away!"
"Did it hurt?"
"Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself.
"When she died?"
"Of course it hurt!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off.

A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn-looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door.
"Hello," I said. "I'm Ruth Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was."
"Oh yes, Mrs. Peterson, please come in."
"Wendy talked of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please accept my apologies."
"Not at all - she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant it.
"Where is she?"
"Wendy died last week, Mrs. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you."

Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. My breath caught.
She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no. She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks she declined rapidly " Her voice faltered. "She left something for you, if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?"
I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, anything, to say to this lovely young woman.
She handed me a smeared envelope, with MRS. P printed in bold, childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues - a yellow beach, a blue sea, a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed:

A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY

Tears welled up in my eyes, and a heart that had almost forgotten how to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, "I'm so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together.

The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words - one for each year of her life - that speak to me of inner harmony, courage, undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand - who taught me the gift of love.

I share this story with you because I think it is a powerful reminder of how often we are oblivious to the gifts we are given by those persons who touch our lives. Sometimes even persons who we encounter only briefly. Through the story we are reminded to open our eyes and to open our hearts to those around us with precious gifts to give. But I also share this story with you because the more I have thought about it, the more I am struck with the similarities between the story of Ruth and Wendy, and the story of Us and God.

Ruth was wrapped up in herself, in her problems, in her grief. She went to the beach to find some sense of peace and serenity. What she found instead was Wendy. Wendy was offering what she needed most, love and joy. But Ruth saw her as a distraction. She resented her presence, probably thinking that she was keeping her from finding the peace she sought from the sea.
Sometimes we are no so different from Ruth. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in ourselves, in our troubles and worries, that we do not recognize the gift God offers us, or are not willing to open ourselves up to receive it. Sometimes we are so intent on
looking to other sources for what we think we need to make us whole, that we do not turn and see what it is God has to give.

In many ways, God is much like the little girl, Wendy. She offered her love freely. God does the same for us. Wendy was persistent. She was not content to go away and leave Ruth alone. Maybe because, in spite of Ruth's gruff exterior, Wendy sensed how much she needed her, and her love. God is persistent, too. He does not leave us alone, even when we think we do not need him. Even when we look to other sources for answers and strength, God is there, offering what we really need, waiting for us to open our heart to his healing love.

When thinking about the story, another thought struck me, although I find it difficult to put into words. It seems like a similarity, yet it is different, too. It is something about the price paid in the giving of the gift. Ruth was not aware that Wendy's gift of love was being given in the face of her death. Wendy was dying, yet she gave her love freely and joyously. It is not as though Wendy died for Ruth, but yet, in her dying, she somehow gave Ruth new life through her gift of love. Maybe Ruth's heart did not fully open to receive Wendy's gift of love until the moment she realized under what circumstances that love had been given.

God gave himself for us, in the form of his son, Jesus Christ. It was through his death that we were made fully aware of how much God loves us. And it is through his death that we receive new life. But this is where the differences are. And they are important differences. Unlike Wendy, Christ not only gave his love in the face of death, he literally gave his life for us. It is because of his death that we have new life. God's gift to us is a gift of love, but more importantly, it is the gift of life:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Surely, knowing the extent of the sacrifice, the depth of the love, we ought to be willing to open our hearts to receive the gift of God's grace.

Wendy's gift of love was given freely, and so is God's gift of love and grace. We cannot earn God's grace, we cannot ever do enough to deserve God's gift of salvation. It is simply there, offered to us freely, if we will only receive it. At times we may be harried, frazzled, depressed, or distracted. In the midst of those times, God's gift is there for us. We may be like Ruth, pushing the gift aside, annoyed at the persistence of the giver, but like Wendy, God will not give up. He waits for us to open our hearts to him.

Such a gift is ours. We have only to believe in faith to receive God's priceless gift. The gift of his grace. Given not because of, but in spite of everything we do and are. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!