THE
GIFT THAT KEEPS
ON GIVING

by Michael Berne
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The Gift that Keeps on Giving

A collection of topical sermon-starter sketches

by Michael Berne
I wish to dedicate this book to the people of the United Methodist congregations that I have served. Not only have they given me inspiration over the years, they have been kind enough to critique them and brave enough to participate in them during Sunday morning worship and at other times. Through their encouragement, I continue to experiment and incorporate fresh, creative ideas in our worship experiences.

Michael A. Berne
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INTRODUCTION

Creativity in worship commands a lot of interest these days. Liturgical dance, mime, puppetry, clowning, storytelling, drama and other innovative forms of worship are not only seeping through the cracks, they are rushing through the front door and down the center aisles of church sanctuaries. Creative expressions of worship are not limited to any one brand of church — large or small, city or rural, young or old. More and more pastors, worship committees and their congregations are willing and eager to experiment and have fun as they express their faith in God, commitment to ministry and fellowship with one another.

Along with "traditional" models of worship (which, of course, were themselves once original), the incoming models of creative worship give breath to our praise gatherings. They heighten and intensify the spiritual experience. They make use of our senses, catching our eyes, alerting our ears, inviting our touch, stimulating our taste and even igniting our sense of smell. For many people, the new forms of worship are a refreshing splash in the pool of Christian experience. For others, the innovations spark an affirmative answer to the question, "Can the dry bones of worship live?"

The sketches in this collection may be used as sermon starters. Scripture references have been provided for each one. All of the selections have been "eld tested" in the churches I have served, and all were well received as part of a vital Christian worship experience.

I invite you to have fun with these selections. Expand upon them, use them in various settings and let them come alive. In all, give glory to Jesus Christ.

Michael Berne
Hobbies

Everyone needs a hobby or pastime to develop skills, relieve stress and just have fun. Some recreational activities, however, are a little more unusual than others. There are certain things that shouldn’t even be considered as hobbies — especially our faith relationship with Jesus Christ. As Jesus says, it is the person who acts upon his word that builds a house on solid ground.


Characters: The Interviewer, Fanny (or Phil) Fumblings, Allison (or Albert) Halfabrain, Arthur (or Angela) Apathy.

Props: Piano, strainer, three glass jars.

Costumes: House dress, mismatched socks and gym shoes for Allison Halfabrain, suit for Interviewer, regular attire for the other two.
INTERVIEWER: (To the congregation) Recreation is an important aspect of our lives. Hobbies provide an important outlet for the stress we accumulate. To examine this idea more closely, we have invited three hobbyists to share with us their unique talents and interests. First, let me introduce Miss Fanny Fumbleingers. (FANNY enters.) Tell us, Miss Fumbleingers, about your hobby.

FANNY: Oh, I just love to play the piano. Why, I practice for fifteen whole minutes once a week, and I take lessons every other six months, unless I don’t feel like it.

INTERVIEWER: Would you care to favor us with a song, such as “Amazing Grace”?

FANNY: Oh, I’d love to! (She sits at the piano and plays “Amazing Grace” very slowly and very badly.)

INTERVIEWER: (Sarcastically) Isn’t that lovely? I thought that playing the piano would demand more time and practice than what you put into it.

FANNY: Why, goodness no, it’s only a hobby. (She exits.)

INTERVIEWER: Yes, well, thank you. Now let’s meet Allison Halfabrain. (ALLISON enters, carrying three glass jars and waving the strainer in the air, as though she is trying to catch something.) What do you do for a hobby, Miss Halfabrain?

ALLISON: Oh, I collect air. I trap it in these jars. You see, this rest jar has air from a pizzeria.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I can smell the pepperoni.

ALLISON: And this second jar holds air from a nuclear power plant. See how it glows?

INTERVIEWER: Just don’t take the lid off. Tell me, though — what is that open, empty jar for?

ALLISON: Well, people told me that if I came here on Sunday mornings, I could get a good supply of hot air.
INTERVIEWER: Cute, very cute. Excuse me, but that seems like a strange and — well, er — simplistic collection.
(Shakes head in disbelief.) Jars of air.
ALLISON: Well, it is only a hobby. (ALLISON continues to collect air as she exits.)
INTERVIEWER: Yes, thank you for coming, Miss Halfabrain. And now let’s hear from our third guest, Mr. Arthur Apathy. (ARTHUR enters.)
ARTHUR: Let me tell you before you even ask. My hobby is religion.
INTERVIEWER: You have religion as a hobby?
ARTHUR: Oh, sure. You see, I go to church once or twice a month, if I’m not too tired from Saturday night. I toss a few bucks into the collection plate, and I go to almost all the church dinners. One year I even served on the evangelism committee, but that wasn’t too bad. We didn’t do anything all year.
INTERVIEWER: But what about growing as a disciple, Bible study, using the gifts of the Holy Spirit, witnessing and things like that?
ARTHUR: Hey, don’t sound so serious. it’s only a hobby. (ARTHUR exits.)
INTERVIEWER: (To congregation) Here’s hoping your faith is more than just a hobby. (INTERVIEWER exits.)
The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Giving often seems to be a tricky area for many Christians, primarily because we put more emphasis upon the gift and what it says about us rather than upon our giving being a response to God's love. Giving should come naturally when we recognize that all we have and all we are is to be used to glorify God.

Scripture Reference: Mark 12:41-44.

Characters: Pastor, Miss Flowing Withcash, Big Giver McGruder, Mr. I.M. Wealthy, the Widow.

Props: A collection plate and two pennies.

Costumes: Flashy dress, jewelry and fancy hat for Miss Flowing Withcash, ten-gallon hat, western shirt, pants and boots for Big Giver McGruder, tailored suit for Mr. I.M. Wealthy, shabby dress and shoes for the Widow, normal Sunday attire for the preacher.
On this Stewardship Sunday, it is important and natural that we take a look at what Jesus had to say about money. On one occasion, when he and his disciples were at the temple in Jerusalem, they watched as many rich people threw huge amounts of coins into the metal, trumpet-shaped receptacles. The donors could listen with a sense of self-importance as the coins clattered and rang and drew the attention of other people. These donors gave large gifts, and—(The PASTOR is suddenly interrupted.)

BIG GIVER: Hold it right there, Preacher. My name is Big Giver McGruder. (He walks to the front of the sanctuary.) I reckon I'm the richest man in this county. Now, I would like to donate the necessary funds to this congregation for the building of a new education wing. All I ask in return is that it be named after me, and that a humble, three-by-five-foot, full-colored portrait of myself be placed in every room. (MISS FLOWING WITHCASH stands and hurriedly makes her way to the front of the sanctuary.)

MISS WITHCASH: Just a moment! Just a moment! Excuse me, Reverend, but I require your attention. I am Miss Flowing Withcash. My friends call me “Flo,” but you may address me as Miss Withcash. Now then, ignoring this silly idea of an education feather or wing or whatever it is, I am prepared to provide this congregation with a beautiful marble fountain, surrounded by a bed of tulips, roses, and chrysanthemums. We shall name it, of course, “Fabulous Flo’s Flowing Fountain of Flowers and Faith.” Isn’t that just a peachy-keen idea?

I.M. WEALTHY: (Standing in his place) That idea makes me nauseous. My name is I.M. Wealthy, but then I guess everyone recognizes me. Let’s forget all this nonsense, because I am prepared to nance the project that this
church really needs. Visualize this: A fifty-five-foot aluminum, neon-lighted cross that alternately ashes to passing motorists the messages: “I.M. Wealthy says” and “Honk if you love Jesus.” How about that for a tool for evangelism?

BIG GIVER: That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Besides, my idea is better because it will cost more.

MISS WITHCASH: But just remember, I am willing to maintain fresh flowers for my fountain all year round. That definitely makes my gift more expensive in the long run.

I.M. WEALTHY: Not when you consider that I am willing to pay half of this church’s utility bill every month. I'd be putting out the most money. Besides, my neon-lighted cross on the roof would be the “loftier” gift.

PASTOR: (Slowly and loudly) Hey! Look! (The three DONORS freeze. Meanwhile, the WIDOW slowly makes her way to the front and places the two pennies in the collection plate, then exits. PASTOR takes the two pennies and holds them up.) Jesus said that this poor widow, with her two pennies, has put in more than all the other gifts combined. They all gave out of their wealth, but she put in all she has. She has given the gift that counts — the gift that keeps on giving. (The CHARACTERS unfreeze and exit.)
A Deadly Virus

The chicken pox, pneumonia, the measles and even the common cold are all illnesses caused by viruses. Viral infections are diseases that can multiply and spread through living cells. Fortunately, the symptoms can be treated and the viral infection held in check. But there is at least one virus that spreads so rapidly that it can contaminate the life of an entire group of people, including a congregation, in a deadly manner.


Characters: Doctor Donothing, Patient.

Props: Clipboard.

Set: Desk and chair.

Costumes: Lab coat for the Doctor, regular attire for the Patient.
(The DOCTOR is sitting behind the desk when the PATIENT enters.)

DOCTOR: Good morning. Welcome to the Universal Medical Arts Building and Bowling Alley. I'm Doctor Donothing. How can I help you?

PATIENT: (Holding on to his/her tongue) I thing I hurd by tomng.

DOCTOR: I'm sorry, would you please repeat that?

PATIENT: (Louder and slower) I said, I thing I hurd by tomng.

DOCTOR: You know, if you would just let go of your tongue, I just might be able to understand you. What did you do, hurt your tongue or something? (PATIENT nods head "yes" vigorously.) OK, let's have a look-see. Now then, tell me — how long have you had this particular tongue?

PATIENT: (No longer holding on to tongue) What are you, crazy? I was born with this tongue. It's just been hurting, that's all.

DOCTOR: (Knowingly) Let me guess. Does it begin with a numbing sensation, so that you cannot pronounce your words properly?

PATIENT: Yes, that's right.

DOCTOR: And then leads to a burning sensation at the tip of your tongue that progresses back toward your throat?

PATIENT: Boy, that's just the way it happens.

DOCTOR: And nally, after several hours of intense pain, your tongue feels like pins and needles for the rest of the day?

PATIENT: Oh, that's right, Dr. Donothing. (Pause) Well?

DOCTOR: Well, what?

PATIENT: (Irritably) Well, what's wrong with my tongue?

DOCTOR: Oh, I have absolutely no idea, but I did have a similar situation with my third cousin on my Uncle Louie's side. He's dead now — my cousin, not Uncle Louie. The same thing happened to his tongue. His tongue would even swell up and turn purple.
PATIENT: Oh my goodness, what did he do?
DOCTOR: Well, he thought about having it surgically removed.
PATIENT: Aaugh!
DOCTOR: Don't worry. He decided to see if laser treatments would be of any benefit.
PATIENT: What happened?
DOCTOR: (Uses his two fingers to help visualize) Have you ever heard the expression “forked tongue”?
PATIENT: That must have been terrible.
DOCTOR: It was. Still, he could do a very good imitation of a hissing cobra. Actually though, I have my own theory. I think this tongue problem is caused by a virus — gossip!
PATIENT: Wait a minute. Are you telling me that gossip is a virus?
DOCTOR: Oh, yes, and a very deadly one, and my third cousin was quite a gossip.
PATIENT: I know just what you mean. My spouse is such a gossip. Why, do you know that just this morning, he/she was telling me that our next-door neighbor was caught for drunk driving? Of course, they have enough money to keep it out of the papers, but it didn't surprise me to hear it. Their son, whom they think is such an angel, is always causing trouble at school. In fact, a reliable source told me that the coach has threatened to kick him off the football team for drinking.
DOCTOR: Oh, sure, like that coach has a lot of room to talk. I have a friend whose sister-in-law's neighbor is positive that she has seen a car that looks just like his parked outside the bar uptown three nights last week.
PATIENT: Well, you think that's bad! My brother, Martin, who has never told a lie in his life, heard someone say something about someone else being arrested at that bar for selling marijuana. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if that place is actually a crack house or the headquarters for
an entire drug-smuggling gang from South America.

DOCTOR: Well, you know that one of the teachers at the high
    school has grandparents who still live in South America.

PATIENT: Just think! All the teachers of our children could
    be involved in such a thing.

DOCTOR: What's wrong with you? Doo dound libe, doo
    dound libe... (The two of them stare at each other in horror
    as they realize what is happening.)

PATIENT and DOCTOR: (Together) Oh no, be god da virus.
    Aaughh! (They run Off-stage in opposite directions.)
A Parable of Caterpillars

The process of growth seems to be a natural one. We know that babies grow to be children, and children grow to be adults. But the growth process should not be confined to physical parameters. Hopefully, we're also maturing intellectually, socially and, most importantly, spiritually. Like a lobster that abandons its shell or a snake that sheds its skin, we all come to those points in life that allow growth to occur. Though growth is good, it can also be a very threatening and frightening experience. But if we want what's best for ourselves, we'll face our fears and continue on to maturity.

Scripture Reference: Genesis 12:1-5.

Characters: Mort and Mable.

Costumes: A white sheet for each character to wrap up in as a cocoon.
(MORT enters Stage Right, wrapped in his cocoon, while
MABLE enters Stage Left, wrapped in her cocoon. They sit next
to each other and stare off into the distance.)

MORT: What a glorious morning to be a caterpillar, Mable!
The mulberry leaves look extra good today. I bet they
taste yummy. Mable? Hey, what's wrong? You look like
you’re a hundred tree branches away.

MABLE: Huh? Oh, I’m sorry, Mort. I was just thinking, and I
have come to a decision. Today I am going to leave my
cocoon.

MORT: Leave your cocoon?! Have you been letting your
mulberry leaves ferment too long again?

MABLE: No, Mort, it’s just that I have such a strong urge to
shed this old constricting skin and become a butterfly.

MORT: Butterfly, Mable, the word is butterfly. But are you
crazy? It’s warm and cozy inside our cocoons. We don’t
have any cares or worries. It’s safe and secure.

MABLE: Yes, I know, but this cocoon is starting to scratch
me. My back is aching, and I think it’s because I’ve been
growing wings.

MORT: Oh, come on now, Mable. If God had intended for
caterpillars to fly, he would’ve given us airplanes.

MABLE: I think God has intended for us to become butterflies
along. After all, look at Arlo.

MORT: Arlo? Who’s Arlo?

MABLE: He’s that caterpillar who lives across the orchard.
He has a solar-heated cocoon with a built-in stereo
system and video machine.

MORT: He’s pretty strange, all right, but what about him?

MABLE: Well, his fancy cocoon was found empty, and they
say that he has become a butterfly.

MORT: Have you actually seen him fly? In fact, have you ever
seen any butterflies? You don’t even know for sure that
they exist, do you?

MABLE: No. I don’t. But we always take risks when we follow
God’s call for us. There are no guarantees — except that
God loves us and will be with us. As long as I believe
that, I’m willing to take the risk.

MORT: Are you sure about this, Mable?

MABLE: No, of course I’m not sure. It’s a scary prospect, and
I feel very nervous. I think I have people in my stomach.
But I’m ready to go — now! (MABLE unwraps her cocoon
and leaves it behind as she begins to exit. She stops when she
hears MORT call to her.)

MORT: Just remember, Mable, you won’t be able to come
back to your old cocoon.

MABLE: Mort, somehow I believe that once I have own, I
won’t ever want to come back. (She nishes her exit.)

MORT: (To the congregation) I still don’t know. Sometimes, I
confess, I do feel that same urge to become more than
what I am now. I can almost hear God calling me to y,
too, but I would have to surrender my security. If I step
into my hopes or expose my inner dreams, I might be
laughed at or ignored. I might even fail, and then where
would I be? If I dare to risk myself in free-oating faith,
I will have to face that moment of total surrender into
God’s hands. If I dare the ight of love, I may not be
loved in return. If I try, I might not make it, but fail?

Perhaps the worst danger is to risk nothing. Tell me what
to do! Should I dare to risk the ight, or wait here until
I die in my swaddling safety? (Depending upon the response
of the congregation and the timing and staging of the skit,
MORT has several options for his exit: Leaving with his cocoon
as an obvious weight and burden, unwrapping the cocoon and
leaving it behind when he exits, dragging it behind him as he
exits or, if the sketch is the nal part of the message, not
leaving at all. Experiment with it and have fun.)
Sorry, No Return

It seems that the one thing we run out of faster and faster is time. Crowded schedules, deadlines and commitments eat away at what has become our most precious commodity. What do we do when we finally realize that the clock is ticking too rapidly for us to accommodate all the things we plan to accomplish?


Characters: Clerk, Customer.

Props: A paper bag containing a calendar.

Set: Table.
(The CLERK is standing behind the table as the CUSTOMER enters carrying the bag.)

CLERK: Good morning! Welcome to Pay-Mart, where we always do our best to keep you smiling while we get your money. And what can we do to, I mean for you, today?

CUSTOMER: I would like to make a return, please. Your sign says that I can return a purchase for any reason.

CLERK: No problem! No problem! You are absolutely right. We have a very liberal return policy here at Pay-Mart. All you need, besides the item itself, of course, is the sales receipt, plus three major credit cards, fourteen character references, a nancial statement from a local bank and a note from your mommy.

CUSTOMER: Yes, I have all of that. I want to return this. (He pulls the calendar from the paper bag.)

CLERK: You want to return a calendar? What do you want to do, exchange it for one with pictures of duckies instead of horses?

CUSTOMER: No, no. You see, this calendar is defective. It doesn’t work right.

CLERK: (Skeptically) You want to return this calendar because it doesn’t work right? (Looks around.) Are you taping this for one of those TV shows about funny home videos or something?

CUSTOMER: No, I’m serious. This calendar is defective. You see, it runs too fast. When I bought this calendar at the beginning of the year, it said I had plenty of time to do whatever I wanted. Now it says that there are only a few months left in the year, but it sure doesn’t seem like it’s been that long to me. I mean, what happened to all the time?

CLERK: I see. You think this calendar is making the days go by too fast. Are you sure you hung it on the wall straight? You know, sometimes if you put these things up at a crooked angle, the numbers can slide down too fast.
CUSTOMER: Yes, I'm sure I hung it straight. It's just that I had so many things planned — so many goals set for this year. I was going to exercise each day and change my eating habits. I was going to catch up on all my letter-writing. Most importantly, I was going to take my Christian discipleship seriously. I was going to study the Bible, help the pastor visit people, witness at work, start tithing and take care of people in need. The time went by so fast, though, and I never got around to doing any of those things.

CLERK: And you want to blame that on the calendar? Listen, friend, I think it's time for a lesson in reality. Now, I understand your problem. I sympathize with not having enough time to do the important things in life. But if the time goes by too fast for you each day, then getting a new calendar is not going to help you. If you nd that your great expectations for each day are unmet, if you realize that you were too busy to patch a quarrel, extend some sympathy or tell someone the Good News about Jesus Christ, it doesn't mean that your calendar is running too fast!

CUSTOMER: It doesn't?

CLERK: No, of course not. It means that your watch is running too fast, and jewelry is on the other side of the store in aisle ten. Good-bye. (CUSTOMER exits.) Wow, that was a close one. I almost had to do some paperwork. (Slight pause, then to an imaginary customer) Good morning, welcome to Pay-Mart. You want to make a return? Sure, no problem. (CLERK exits.)
The Trouble With Life

No one is immune from the onslaught of difficulties in life, and the Christian faith does not promise to be a barrier between ourselves and the problems that come our way. Like the fabled Three Little Pigs, we can do our best to keep the wolf away from the door, but trouble usually manages to find a way in, despite our best efforts. Where do we place our security so that we can remain steadfast when we come up against problems and failures?


Characters: The Narrator, Arlo, Mable, Arnold, the Wolf.

Props: Three cowboy hats, bottle.

Set: Six total chairs — three grouped together at Stage Right for one “house,” three grouped together at Stage Left for the other “house.”

Costumes: Mask and brown sweatsuit for Wolf, pig noses and pink sweatsuits for Pigs.
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