

## "THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS"

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We recently welcomed our Nursery School children into this sanctuary to celebrate Christmas. Before telling the story, singing the songs, or praying the prayers, I egged them on, "How many of you are excited about Christmas?" I heard a sizable roar of enthusiasm. Then I asked, "How many are excited about getting *presents!*" The roar grew deafening.

That is how children are at Christmas: unashamed, unabashed, unselfconscious about receiving gifts, freely given from beyond. As a boy, after opening my Christmas presents, as the adults settled into soft chairs, I snuck off to telephone my friends. "Listen to this," I would breathlessly report. "I got a Beatles album, a transistor radio, a new board game, and shin pads. Quite a haul," I bragged. They responded. "That's nothing, listen to this..."

My mom cast dark glances my way to remind me how crass and unseemly such talk was. She frowned at my grasping words about "what I got." Her chastening meant to guide me back toward what we tend to call "the true meaning of Christmas." Everyone knows the true meaning of Christmas is not getting, but giving; not receiving, but providing for others. We hear that so often, it is unquestioned. But as a boy, I could not help myself.

For my brothers and I lived in brazen thrall to the vast generosity of Christmas. We were aware that we didn't deserve it all. We knew it. But that was part of the mystery. That is what made Christmas so free, unfettered, and full of grace. For no matter how annoying or obstreperous we were, no matter how much our noses ran, no matter how much we squirmed and teased, or how little we contributed to the GNP, the gifts would appear. Gifts with our names upon them. As we tore them open, we would look at our parents, crushed by their love, as if to say, "Are you sure this is for *me*? Do I really get to *keep* it?"

What if I said four days before Christmas that the kids have gotten it right and we adults—full of ourselves—have it backwards? Stick with me on this for a moment. Have you ever noticed how in the run-up to Christmas we grownups perceive ourselves as so benevolent and altruistic? Yes, certainly, many people are generous in this season, maybe giving and doing more than any other time of year. And I recognize that that is a beautiful thing. But is that the point of Christmas, our human giving, one to another? Christmas is less about the gifts the magi brought and more about the gift God gave in Christ for all time.

Advancing this image of the entire world becoming noble and unselfish at Christmas is vital to its widespread appeal. It's one big reason why most everyone, even non-Christians, love the holiday. The six o'clock news updates us on how worthy poor families are helped. We toss spare change toward the Salvation Army pot and beam at how generous we are.

As children at Christmas, we weren't cast as givers. Oh, I made a ceramic gravy boat for mom in 4th grade. Even I shuddered at how hideous it was. I scratched out a few pathetic gifts from my meager dollars. Nevertheless, we didn't harbor illusions of being the givers.

No, we were the receivers. I'll have you know we excelled at receiving. We didn't miss a beat. Without wanting to sentimentalize childhood, I still say that kids, in their exposed need and unguarded desire, know more about the true meaning of Christmas than we do.

Our tale from Luke tells of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to declare the gift she'd receive. God would make this teen girl into a single mom. What?! Her gift seems suspicious. But this adolescent shows poise by humbly and gratefully going with this dubious distinction. The blessing part of things would unfold later. Then the same angel appears to Joseph so Mary *doesn't* become a single mother. Her birth came at the worst possible time, when the Roman Empire was counting the subjects so they could better control everyone's life.

The birth of this precious baby happens on a road trip that Caesar forces upon them. The first witnesses are poor shepherds. In that day they were the equivalent of today's youth working the fast-food drive-through windows. They had no vaunted gifts to give. The barn animals had no gifts to give. But that didn't matter, because for Mary and Joseph it was about surviving. And finding their way into the thriving of the blessing Gabriel foretold. Yes, some magi do show up later with impractical gifts of myrrh, frankincense, and gold. It's a beautiful gesture, even if we are not entirely certain what they mean by it. But the giving of these awkward but valuable gifts was secondary to the real Gift. By a long shot.

What is the real Gift? "To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Notice the box score. God is the giver; we humans are the receivers. *And we are receiving the greatest gift imaginable.* We did nothing to deserve it. We did nothing to prompt or empower this. We didn't conceive of it, understand it, or approve it.

All we did at Bethlehem was *receive* it. So those present and accounted for at the first Christmas weren't so much great givers. They were great receivers like my brothers and I. And the constant lesson in Luke's account of Jesus' birth isn't how blessed *our* giving is, but how essential it is to know ourselves first as receivers. John the Evangelist sums up what's going on here in the first chapter of his Gospel, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth...*And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*" Nothing about our altruism there. Receiving this precious grace of Jesus Christ even before we start talking about our giving is the true meaning of Christmas. It's the beginning point; it's the end point. It's where I would point us now in the stretch drive.

Don't get me wrong. Jesus spoke well as he declared it more blessed to give than to receive. No quibbling with that. But as we reflect a bit, it is holier and more difficult to receive than it is to give. And that is because we--like all people--are basically full of ourselves.

Enamored with power and control, we make better givers than receivers. For, you see, as we give, we are in control. As we give, we are competent, self-sufficient, capable individuals. For our goodness is helping the less able. As we give, we remain our own masters. We adore nothing so much as being in control. Frankly, we prefer to see ourselves as the givers: standing on our own, taking charge, putting things right, helping out lesser folk.

Clearly, it is more *blessed* to give than to receive. But in many ways, receiving is holier. For unless you're a child or unless have the quiet trust of Mary, it is much more difficult to receive than to give. For as we receive--especially a lovely gift from someone we do not know well--we suddenly feel vulnerable and indebted. Our lives are no longer completely our own. We feel a mysterious claim on us from beyond us. We are beholden to another.

What is the first thing we do? We shake off that feeling as quickly as possible by returning our own gift to the giver. "Did I even buy anything for her?" we wonder inwardly. "Was it as good as what she got me?" We may have trouble looking the giver in the face until we reciprocate with an equivalent gift. When we receive, we feel dependent, needy, empty-handed. Suddenly our lives are no longer our own. The balance is disrupted. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," John Wesley once observed.

Living on the receiving end is hard. Of course, that's where faith begins and ends. As Will Willimon puts it, discipleship teaches us the art of seeing all of our lives as a gift. It asks a radical adjustment in how we view ourselves, leaving no room for pride, power, or control.

God gave us Jesus not just to make us less miserable as the days grow short and cold. The dimensions of God's free, transforming initiative of love were far vaster. As human-kind, we had this deep, unsatisfied desire we couldn't even recognize or describe till we realized who Jesus Christ actually was. God knowing and meeting our deepest desire before we could know or express it is joy. Even the most able poets struggle to describe joy. John Milton settled with calling it, "enormous bliss." Happiness is fleeting. But joy is momentous. We don't forget joy because once we taste it, life is pale until we taste it again. Living by joy's gracious light illumines our lives, and even the nature of life itself.

This is our last Sunday to prepare for Christmas. Before our giving to others can be pure, we first recognize how much we receive from God--namely, everything. In order to purify our giving, we do very well to humble ourselves like figurines kneeling before the crèche. Here we forsake all claims to life as our due and live by grace. Everything becomes a gift. That's why Jesus pointed at tots and said to enter God's reign we must become like them. Can we become little? Can we become small enough to allow God coming in Jesus Christ to loom large? The true meaning of Christmas isn't about our gifts for each other. It is about what God gives us. The poetry of carols comes closest to capturing God's gift.

"Tidings of comfort and joy...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to-night...Word of the Father now in flesh appearing...Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled...Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give us second birth...To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray...He will bring us goodness and light..." We could sing all day, and still only touch the tip of the iceberg.

It is still possible to live in unabashed thrall to the generosity of Christmas. Let us get ourselves and our grownup egos out of the way and allow baby Jesus to show us the way. Amen.