

SERMONS TO GO

THE GIFT

John 1:1-14

December 25, 2011

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Commercialism, the calendar, and a few faith celebrations converge this time of year. Sometimes there is confusion about what is important. Consider this scenario, an account from a colleague of mine who serves a church in Orland Park, just outside Chicago. Melissa spends every Tuesday night at a Panera coffee shop on LaGrange. These are her “office hours” and she invites anyone to come and chat. She even buys their beverage. Last week, she experienced what so many get caught up in these busy Christmas days.

Two women chewed out the cashier for saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”...I was sitting next to them and overheard their many conversations, including one about Christmas morning...

“I can’t believe our church is having services on Christmas morning...My husband has to hand out bulletins...Why don’t they just cancel it? I mean really...”

Pastor Melissa interjected, inserted her thoughts out loud: “Yeah, I just hate it when Jesus gets in the way of Christmas...Merry Christmas, right?” Their response? They took their things and left, calling Pastor Melissa a ‘Christian’ name on their way out.

Most of us have heard other grumblings about the Christmas season. While we are out making preparations for family gatherings or shopping for those perfect Christmas gifts we hear people complain about all the other people out doing the same thing. Or they are grumbling about how expensive Christmas is. You might overhear others boasting about how much or how little they spent.

Gift giving can be troublesome. Spend too much and you’ve made the wrong impression. Spend too little, and then you and your gift are considered cheap.

I watched *30 Rock* on Friday. It was their Christmas episode. Alec Baldwin’s and Tina Fey’s characters Jack and Liz were preparing to exchange gifts for the first time. Another staff member warned Liz about Jack. Jack is the best gift giver in the world. He told Liz, “I bought him a \$95 bottle of olive oil and he got my sister out of a North Korean jail.”

As Jack put it, gift giving is the purest expression of friendship. “I’m going to think about what I know and like about you, that will lead me to the perfect gift.”

After a few failed attempts by Liz, Jack decided their gifts should cost zero dollars. Liz kept an old girlfriend from leaving town, giving Jack his wish of getting a kiss. She did it by stopping all the trains with a bomb threat. Well, it didn’t cost Liz any money. The consequences? It’s just a comedy on television, taking the idea of gift giving to extremes.

I have to admit, I liked the zero dollars part. And Jack’s excitement about giving as an expression of a relationship. “I’m going to think about what I know and like about you, that will lead me to the perfect gift.”

A few years ago I met poet, peace activist, and contributing editor of Sojourners magazine, Rose Marie Berger. Raised in a Roman Catholic home, Rose Marie’s faith shapes her whole life. While we were together in Philadelphia in the middle of a very hot July, our conversation turned to, of all things, our Christmas traditions. She shared how her father built a small manger from scrap wood. Every evening during Advent her parents asked her and the other children what acts of kindness they did that day. For each good thing, they could put a piece of straw in the manger. The warmth and welcome of the baby Jesus on Christmas depended on the quality and quantity of kindness they showed to those in need during Advent.

That same summer I met Dr. Tony Campolo, author, sociologist, pastor, social activist, and passionate follower of Jesus. He’s an amazing speaker, always sharing the most memorable moments when the gift of Jesus is lived out in the lives of his disciples.

Tony tells the story about the late Mike Yaconelli, who told the story about a deacon in his church who wasn’t ‘deaking.’ He just didn’t do what he was supposed to do as a deacon. (A deacon, in some Christian traditions, is called to serve, whether it is to visit the homebound, deliver meals, or offer care in practical ways.)

One day Mike said to the deacon, “I have a group of young people who go to the senior home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the senior home? At least do that?” The deacon agreed.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man’s hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon.

The next month, and the next month, and the next month.

Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over him, that's all right."

The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and bless him eternally.

As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks.

He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time."

The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

This is the gift of Christmas. Imagine God saying, "I'm going to think about what I know and love about you, that will lead me to the perfect gift." And then God gives us God's self, in human form. The Word of God really became real flesh. This is the whole message of the gospel. This is the miracle, the gift of Christmas. It is entering into our flesh that Jesus reveals to us who God actually is, has been, and always will be. It is in this unlikely way that he is our true light, our life. It is in this way He is the Way.

But to all who believed in him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

This is why we proclaim and live an incarnational, in the flesh faith. Why we seek Jesus not only in the words we say, but in the life we share. If we are paying attention, we recognize that God is in the ordinary moments of our life—in the making of lunches, and the folding of laundry, in daily kisses good-bye, in the moment when we look into the eyes of one whom the world considers unlovely and unworthy and we reach out our hand to hold another. They feel and see Jesus. The Word made flesh.

This Christmas morning we celebrate Jesus living in us and through us. All the singing and celebrating in 4 worship services last night, all the voices that lifted the name of Jesus through the roof, the prayers that gave thanks to God the Creator who speaks love into our lives are echoed in you. You who teach us about recycling and caring for the environment. You who offer us ways to be better consumers and consider how our spending impacts individuals through fair trade and equal

exchange. You who touch the hand of a stranger in welcome, give them a place to sleep and food to eat and an ear to listen to a beautiful life. You who put food on tables and in hungry bellies, you who find clothes and transportation and companionship for the poor and the isolated and the lonely. You who share the story of God, who teach children to pray, who teach them to sing and dance. You who care and reach out and risk loving. This is incarnational faith at work, Nardin Park.

This morning our worship is a sign that we understand the gift that is Christmas. As the Grinch learned on Christmas morning after he had removed all the tinsel and lights and packages from Whoville in his attempt to keep Christmas from coming, he experienced this...

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling:
How could it be so?
It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes, or bags!
And he puzzled and puzzled, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more."

This time next year, we will celebrate all the ways and all the places our faith "in the flesh" is realized. We will be inviting everyone to share their hand-holding, their giving, their serving. Not so we can boast about how much we do and where we go. We simply want to collect them, as pieces of straw for a baby's bed, creating warmth and comfort, creating home for the child of God to dwell and grow with us.

Merry Christmas! Amen! ~