

“SPEND LESS!”
by Rom A. Pegram (12/13/20)

Today, during our candle lighting, we'll be talking about JOY. JOY is very much a part of this season of preparation that we're in—preparing to worship the newborn King! And that alone should bring us JOY. But sometimes we need tangible ways to experience that JOY, to know the JOY that Christ really wants us to have in our lives. So, *where do we find our JOY?* In our life with Christ; that's where. In the living out of this life of faith God has called us to...

But sometimes, we need to rethink how we do Christmas, don't we? *We may even need to rethink how we're used to spending at Christmas.* And that can be a hard concept to get used to. And what exactly does that mean—spend less? We're going to talk about that. Briefly, it's really moving from simply looking at our personal desires ... to the needs present in our communities and the rest of the world. And, within that rethinking, I believe we will discover real JOY...

I have to be honest today; what I'm going to share with you now brings me JOY ... and I hope it brings JOY to you too. Here's a note recently received by our OCC team about the work they—through Trinity—have been doing. The letter is from an area coordinator with OCC, from the Minneapolis area. Listen...

Dear Trinity United Methodist Church family,

This probably violates some Operation Christmas Child policy but here goes.

I just returned from volunteering at the Chicagoland Processing Center and had the privilege of preparing some of your beautiful shoebox gifts for shipping on December 2. I have volunteered to process shoeboxes for many years and also serve as a year-round volunteer with OCC, so I have seen a lot of shoeboxes. I have to say that your shoeboxes are among the most generous and intentional gifts that I have seen. Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes are a tangible expression of God's love and a shoebox packed to the very top with so many nice and useful things certainly reflects the abundance of God's love—packed down, shaken together and overflowing (Luke 6:38). I also know from my experience at outreach events that your notes with colorful photos will be treasured by the children who get them and will surely encourage them on their faith journey. Whether you hear back from your children or not, I am certain that your gifts will be received with a lot of joy and will hopefully create a desire to learn more about Our Lord Jesus Christ through *The Greatest Journey* discipleship program.

Your shoeboxes and thoughtful note made me stop and smile just thinking about the astonished looks on so many little faces when they receive your gifts and how the example of your unconditional love for someone you do not know will help encourage those young ones to respond in faith to the Gospel.

Merry Christmas and many blessings to you all!
David Hoiriis, Operation Christmas Child
Area Coordinator, Minneapolis West Metro Volunteer

True JOY in our lives comes when we know that we are without a doubt living in the center of God's will. The shoebox project seems like a very simple thing, doesn't it? But, to many in the world, the need for Christmas (really, to celebrate Jesus) is a serious concern! In other words, if Jesus were walking the face of this earth during Advent 2020, how do you think he'd feel about ... shoeboxes? Just listen (Matthew 10:40-42, NLT):

“Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father who sent me. ⁴¹ If you receive a prophet as one who speaks for God, you will be given the same reward as a prophet. And if you receive righteous people because of their righteousness, you will be given a reward like theirs. ⁴² And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.”

I know many of you probably already give sacrificially to good causes during Christmas. *Rethinking Christmas is not about what you usually do.* It's simply about doing more with what you already have ... and we'll qualify that in just a moment. Know this: *Our intent this season is to deliberately put more of Christ back into Christmas...*

- One of the ways we can put more of Christ back into Christmas is *to be very deliberate about worship*—to worship fully in many ways, as we go through this season together, letting nothing get in the way of our worship—giving Jesus our full attention...
- And one of the ways we can put more of Christ back into Christmas is also *to adjust our spending*—to rethink it, if you will...

Frankly, we'll be able to celebrate the birth of Jesus more fully when we learn to focus less on what we spend and more on what we give from a place of true worship. So, today, we're going to talk about that first step, to...

SPEND LESS... In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus tells us: “Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.” So folks, the first thing we need to do is to ... **qualify what 'spending less'—being deliberate about your spending—really means...**

Spending less is really kind of ambiguous, isn't it? Could it mean that I...

- Spend less than last year?
- Spend less than my neighbor?

- Spend less than the average American, who spends one thousand dollars on Christmas gifts?

Well, yes ... and no... **The key is to ask the question and then be willing to wrestle with the tensions that surface.** Here's the question: *How much is too much? How can you tell when you have too much?* Those are the questions that'll make us re-think our spending...

Most of us have too much, you know. And, if you don't believe that, then let me ask you: *When was the last time you moved?* I'll guarantee you, for most of us, if we had to pack up our home with all our possessions and move ... we'd know we had too much! Folks, when this series and the idea of Rethinking Christmas is talking about *spending less*, this is what we're talking about...

Jane's maternal Grandfather was quite a character. He was a very successful farmer in central Illinois—one of the only people I know who would trade for a brand-new car every year in his later years ... and would always have the latest 3-wheeler or 4-wheeler or whatever would help him run down the long lane to the mailbox and cruise around the farm. He had everything a man would ever need ... or want, for that matter.

One Christmas, the family was all together, and everyone was opening up presents. There was wrapping paper flying everywhere! Some of you know how it goes. Someone hands out the gifts. Others open a gift, while the group watches and enjoys their receiving of the gift. Well, Haden opened a gift and everyone was watching him. After opening it up, he looked at whatever it was, turned to the person next to him and said, "Do you want this? I don't really need it."

Well, I'm sure whoever gave him that gift wasn't hurt ... so much as they were amused. Why? Because the whole family knew Haden. You couldn't buy him anything. He was a man who didn't really need anything. You may have well spent that gift money on someone who did have needs, because it was simply going to waste there...

That's what we're talking about—cutting back on those things that just get tossed in a corner anyway. We're talking about really having to think through what we spend at Christmas ... and why we spend the way we do. If we think about it hard, the conclusion we'll come up with is ... *all of us can spend less somewhere, can't we?* But that being said...

'Spending less' doesn't mean 'spending nothing!' So, SPEND LESS is our message for today...

...EXCEPT WHEN YOU SHOULD SPEND MORE! I want to make it clear today ... **the problem is not 'capitalism.'** It's possible to spend compassionately and responsibly regardless of the economic system we're part of. The question we must finally ask is, "Who or what is our money supporting?"

You know, if you have a 32" TV that works perfectly well, do you really need a 55" TV to help you celebrate the Christ of Christmas? Do we really need to spend more on

products we don't need? That being said, *there are times where we do need to spend more...*

A pastor in a Buenos Aires shantytown where homes are little more than mud huts gets his church members to make thousands of gorgeous leather Bible covers that are sold in America and used to support these indigenes persons in Argentina. Most Americans may not need a new Bible cover, but when we choose to purchase one, we can be grateful knowing that God is using our money for the greater good of his Kingdom...

There are times to spend more to help others keep gainful employment, feed their children, and get basic medical care (even supporting local businesses throughout the pandemic of 2020!). The question we must ask though, when we spend, is ... "Who or what is our money supporting?" Once again, the problem isn't 'capitalism'; **the problem at Christmastime ... is the age-old 'love of money!'**

Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money." – Matthew 6:24 (NLT)

A while ago now, Alan Greenspan—in Congress—railed against what he called the 'infectious greed.' What we've discovered over the years is that that innate greed so common in our world today cannot be eliminated through legislation; you cannot legislate Godly behavior; that's a heart thing. Unfortunately, our economy and society have accepted 'radical greed' as the norm ... and too often we tend to want to justify the suffering of others that our lifestyles cause! *The only sure remedy is a change of heart, and the best place to begin is at the feet of the newborn Jesus...*

- Are we willing to rethink the way we use our wealth, especially during this season before us?
- Do we long to rediscover the beauty of Godly giving?

It can make a difference, you know ... and you'll have an opportunity to do just that this Advent season. But, for today, think about these words of King Solomon when he said (Prov. 19:17, NLT): "If you help the poor, you are lending to the LORD—and he will repay you!" Some have come to realize this truth of God's word. When we spend our money in God's name, it will never fail; it will always bless someone who needs to be blessed...

On Christmas Eve, we're going to have a chance to demonstrate our understanding of this truth of God's word. Our Stewardship & Finance Committee decided just this month that the church as a whole needs to be about the mission work of God—sharing the Gospel with others in a tangible way. So, I'm happy to announce that with this year's Christmas Offering, 10% will go directly to our Operation Christmas Child missions—to help in the year to come. So, I'm asking you all now...

- What would it take for us to give this a try?
- Wouldn't leading just one life to Christ be worth it?

At the end of this season, we hope you'll know the JOY we've been talking about today—rethinking our spending so every bit of what we spend really counts ... eternally. Then, in rethinking Christmas—especially the spending part, we pray your celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus will be focused *less* on what you spend ... and *more* on giving from a place of true worship...