

“GIVE MORE!”
by Rom A. Pegram (12/20/20)

The invitation to push back against consumerism at Christmas is felt deeply within many people. We've grown tired of holiday ads ... that start at Halloween. Kids struggle to find a connection between their Christmas lists ... and the birth of Jesus. Parents search for a brief moment of quiet—of worship. And many of us end the Christmas season with an aching emptiness. Sifting through the piles of things we don't need or won't use, something deep inside says ... we missed it—whatever 'it' is our souls long for...

And now we've been invited to rebel against the craziness of the season by 'spending less.' But then, at the same time, we're being encouraged to 'spend more.' Is this a contradiction? Maybe not...

I think we can all agree there's something deeply moving and beautiful about certain gifts. As we begin today, take just a moment and think about 'the most memorable gift' you've ever received. What was it about that gift that touched you? Why do you still remember it to this day? My guess is ... you're probably not remembering a pair of new cars in the driveway with big red bows ... or a huge diamond bracelet hanging on the tree—like those in Christmas commercials. The truth is, for most of us, 'the most memorable gift' is usually one that's a different kind of gift—a *relational* one...

Yes, the very best gifts are usually those that celebrate a relationship. They're relational! One of my favorite gifts is a sign board that a friend found somewhere, that says "MUSIC ... the voice of the soul." They didn't make it, but they thought of me when they saw it, so bought it for me. I've had it a few years and I cherish it to this day. It reminds me of the one who gave it to me. It's a relational gift. And, to me, it's priceless...

Folks, it sounds so obvious, yet we seem to have drifted from this liberating, straightforward truth: *The Father gave his one and only Son. God's answer to the world's problems has never been stuff. God didn't give us more stuff as the best gift; he gave us himself—the most priceless and personal gift of all...* And this simple truth is why giving is still a good way to celebrate Jesus' birthday. And it points to a way out of the chaos of consumerism too often present at Christmas, taking us back to the JOY that's still found at the heart of Christmas. It's really all about the INCARNATION... The Gospel of John begins with this sentence: "In the beginning was the Word"—John's term for his friend, Jesus, in these opening lines to his eyewitness account—"and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Unfortunately, these words have grown stale to many. We seem to rush past the mind-blowing claims stated in John's opening paragraph. And when we do, we miss the power of John's words. It's all about God's relational gift to us, isn't it? Let's go now to our scripture lesson for today, from John 1:1-14 (NLT)...

“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He existed in the beginning with God.³ God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.⁶ God sent a

man, John the Baptist,⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony.⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light.⁹ The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.¹⁰ He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him.¹¹ He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.¹² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.¹⁴ So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.” – John 1:1-14 (NLT)

Folks, Jesus—as the incarnation of God—is our fullest and best understanding of God. It’s because of the gift of the INCARNATION that the infinite God becomes more tangible, more approachable, and more comprehensible (though never completely). It’s because of Jesus that we know who the Eternal God of the universe is and what he’s really like. Talk about a relational gift!

And it’s the INCARNATION we celebrate when we worship; it’s what we celebrate when we come to the communion table. It’s the *very good news* we proclaim to a world that has pretty much forgotten what *very good news* sounds like—God in the flesh, a part of *our history*! Apart from the INCARNATION, we’d never fully know the depths to which we are loved or the lengths to which God can be trusted. *That’s what we celebrate at Christmas...*

And when we give relationally at Christmas, this is what it really means: it’s an opportunity to worship as we remind each other of the gift that was given by God for our sake. A part of that worship is to give to others—to GIVE MORE. So, this Christmas, how can we give relationally, just as God did when he gave us his one and only Son? Folks, here’s how God gave more:

God gave us his presence! God gave us the gift of his ‘presence’—*not presents (packages)*. Sometimes all others want is the gift of your time—being present with them; but how many of us are willing to give that precious gift during this season?

In the INCARNATION, God drew close in a very specific, historical way. In Matthew’s gospel (1:23b, NLT), he takes us back to the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying, “...they will call him Immanuel (God with us!).” God gave us the gift of his very presence ... in Jesus! He took the time to come see us; God gave us the gift of his time ... and so much more...

Folks, when we make time to be with someone, that’s a gift—a relational gift! Our world is increasingly broken and the way we connect now is through pseudo-communities, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the list goes on and on. These can be important ways to keep in touch, but nothing can ever replace the flesh-and-blood aspect of a real relationship. I realize that’s what most of us are missing—*craving*—right now. But these days will soon pass ... and we’ll never take in-person relationships for granted again—I

hope. God gave us his presence. We need to be offering the same to others. Here's something else...

God's gift was personal. The angel announced to the shepherds (Luke 2:11, NLT): "The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!"—a very personal gift indeed! And over and over again in the gospels we hear about *the relational nature of Jesus*; he simply liked being with people—liked the personal aspect of relationships...

Some time ago, my daughter Rachel gave me just such a gift. Conspiring with her brother, Josh, she managed to create this poster and give it to me. I want you to know that this poster—complete with at least two 'dad-isms'—means more to me than any other gift she could have given. Why? *It's personal!* This gift would not mean anything to anyone else but ME! It's personal that way ... and because of who was behind it—my children. And, in spite of this poster, I still think they are precious! *They could not have given me a more personal gift...*

Folks, I want you to know today that God could not have given us a more personal gift than he gave us in sending us his Son! That was the gift of God's presence, God's time, and effort, and love ... and it was personal. *The best gifts always celebrate relationships.* So, God's gift was personal ... AND...

God's gift was costly. Philippians 2:5-8 (NLT) tells us: "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.⁶ Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." *The gift of God cost him everything!* So, with that in mind, what does that mean for us as we give to others?

Practically speaking, with God's gift as our example, it means we must accept what relational giving will cost us...

- It may mean supporting loved ones financially at some point. (How many of us have got that call from our kids?)
- It may mean supporting loved ones emotionally at some point. ('Anyone in your family ever gone through some kind of loss in their lives (physical/relational)?
- It may mean giving in such a way that may be *risky* at times: What if they don't like it? What if they don't understand our intent? What if they don't appreciate the time & effort we put into expressing our love for them?

Part of our relational giving will mean that we'll be misunderstood at times; that's a fact ... but the gift, as God has shown us clearly, is not about the giver; it's about the one receiving the gift ... and that makes the investment costly! On the other hand, *can you think of a better way to celebrate Jesus ... than by giving the way God gave to us?* WE NEED TO 'GIVE MORE' IN THESE WAYS...

Our costly gifts—like the Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes—make an eternal difference in the lives of others. If not money, it costs us time & effort to help with this mission. To many of us, these shoeboxes are *not* costly. But remember, it's not about us; it's about the one who receives this gift. To them ... it's something they may never have imagined they'd be given in their lifetime. But our efforts, our time, and our funds ... can make it happen in more and more lives. Let me give you, as I close today, one more aspect of God's giving to us that we need to understand...

God's gift bridged the gap. Yes, Jesus bridged the gap between our being lost eternally (due to our sin) and being saved, but that's not all I'm talking about here today; what I'm talking about includes things like 'the generation gap,' or 'the pandemic gap' we've all experienced this year...

In 2020, we've been warned against gathering with too many people at once, so there's been kind of a 'pandemic gap' this year? Here's what two great granddaughters did about it...

Two young women loved their Nana, whom they'd been missing this year, and gave her a modest but most precious Christmas gift. It consisted of a large mason jar full of colorful strips of paper—52 of them, to be exact. The instructions were simple. At the beginning of each week in the new year, Nana was to randomly pull out one of the brightly colored pieces of construction paper. On it she would find a story, handwritten by one or both of her great-granddaughters. The story would recount the time they'd spent growing up with her loving care. One went like this: "I remember you walking me around the pond and feeding the ducks...." It was a simple celebration of very personal moments this great grandma had invested in these two young women. It was also a way to tell her, even though they couldn't see her very much right now, that they hadn't forgotten about the relationship. In fact, they told her that they too would remember and thank God for their great grandma in the coming year, as they looked forward to more moments together.

To hear this elderly woman talk about this gift, Monday morning was now her favorite time of the week. A moment of nostalgia, yes, but a time of worship too. God was making this connection between generations vibrant again ... with a mason jar ... and a few strips of construction paper ... and it was a great time to thank God! And it's connections like this—gaps being bridged—that you can expect as we continue to 'Rethink Christmas' this year...

Folks, if we can just resist the trap of giving easy gifts, and if we can reject the assumption that giving expensive gifts or lots of gifts is the best way to express God's love for others, something else—*something miraculous*—may just begin to happen... (Forget original; go and find a mason jar & construction paper as soon as you can...)

Let me remind you that Christmas is coming. As in-person as we can get right now ... we'll be gathering this coming Sunday evening—the 20th—right here in our parking lot. Things will start happening about 6 PM that evening—'Caroling in the Car' in the parking lot, and bell music/flower distribution out front under the carport. That evening, folks, we're going to have a parking lot party for Jesus! And perhaps the most

important part of our Christmas celebration this year will be ... *the offering*. Just as God offered us his Son that first Christmas 2,000+ years ago—extending his love to all of us ... so too we can extend God's love to others in a very tangible way ... through our Christmas Offering. Remember: 10% of the Christmas Offering this year will go directly to our Operation Christmas Child mission project here at Trinity—to help with this coming year. We can ALL be a part of reaching out to a hurting world!

Folks, I can't imagine growing up in a home where I'd go to bed hungry at night, because there wasn't enough food to feed the family. I can't imagine growing up in a home where a few crayons were too much to even hope for. We are blessed. It's time now, in the name of Christ, to share those blessings with others—to make a difference in lives, just like Analyn's. Won't you join me in praying about what to put in the Christmas Offering box next Sunday evening? Together, that's how we're going to GIVE MORE...