

Advent 1A: Spending Less
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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Well, I guess you can say I started out with good intentions. This past Thursday was Thanksgiving, and I had the pleasure of sharing Thanksgiving dinner with Anna, our kids, her parents and grandmother. As I said, it started out with good intentions. But by the end of the day, it's blugghh. Ah, yeah, good. Fatty Mcbutterpants...if you remember the show, *King of Queens*.

You know how it is. You start out with a little and, then, you reason, "Ah, it's the holidays, I'll have a little more pie. I mean, really, it's just a half piece...ok, two half pieces from two different pies...I didn't want to insult the cooks. But then fifteen minutes later, you know which one you like, and you go back for your first "official" piece, because the other ones didn't count—this one counts. And before you know it, it's uggh. You just keep eating. Because if a little is good, more is better, and a lot is the best. That's what we think, isn't it? But it doesn't matter, because you thought ahead and you're wearing your "fat pants," right? It's Thanksgiving. But eventually that's not good enough and you have to undo the top and loosen your belt. Don't look at me like I'm the only one who did that.

That's crazy, isn't it? What gets us there? The idea is that if I just had a little bit more, that'll be enough. You know what the most amazing thing is about the Thanksgiving meal? You're hungry again in three hours. You've just gorged yourself on enough food to feed a small African village and then you're like, "It's been three hours, I could eat." It's amazing! We overdo it, we over-indulge and then the next day we're asking ourselves, What were we thinking?

And it's not just food. We overdo a lot of things. Some people overdo it watching TV—they binge-watch whole seasons of a TV show at a time. Eleven, twelve hours later, the day's gone, no chores have been done, and they wonder, "What was I thinking?" Some people overdo it on Facebook and social media. When they finally look up from the computer, hours have gone by and their boss is looking over their shoulder, and they ask themselves, What was I thinking? Some even overdo exercise—they spend hours and hours working out. What are *they* thinking? And yes, some of us spend money on things that don't satisfy and then we open up that bill a month later and say, What were we thinking?

Last week, I talked about the danger of political ideology, but if I'm honest, the danger that most of us face isn't any formal philosophy or religion. It's materialism, consumerism. Like other religions, consumerism promises power, status, pleasure, fulfillment. It promises to solve the problems in our lives, in society and even in our national economy. Buy this luxury car, and you'll have this glamorous, GQ lifestyle. Buy this "new and improved" clothes detergent, and it'll transform your relationship with your kids! Buy this soft drink, and we will have world peace and sing together in perfect harmony. Ads these days are hilarious if you stop and analyze them. I mean, really, how is drinking a certain Mexican beer going to make you the "most interesting man in the world"? And will eating yogurt really help you lose thirty pounds in a week?

But the problem with consumerism isn't the duplicitous ads, not really. The problem is the way in which it appeals to our sense of dissatisfaction, our feelings of inadequacy, and quite exploits, literally capitalizes on those feelings, makes money off them. At its base, you see, consumerism is founded not on fulfillment, but on dissatisfaction, discontentment. Our lives are boring, messy, unattractive, exhausting and unsatisfying, but...if we buy this product, it'll fix all that. Only it never does. And so we buy something else and then something else, constantly searching for the one thing that will satisfy us. And that's what's so sad about it. Because, the truth is, if we're not happy *without* something; we won't be happy *with* it either. As Eric Hoffer has said, "You can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy."

And of course, this has an effect on us spiritually, on our relationship with God. Each time we trust the promises of our possessions, more barriers are raised between us and God's plain command to love *Him* above all things. And that's the real issue: it's not that we necessarily want more – it's that what we want, what we need, is something we can't buy. It's that we are searching for God and have settled for stuff instead.

That danger, that temptation is especially acute this time of year, in the weeks leading up to Christmas. There's a lot of pressure to spend money at this time of year, a lot of pressure to put on the best Christmas for our families, to give them those "perfect Christmas memories." Somehow, over the years, as Christmas has been bought and sold and marketed and commercialized, it's gone from being the amazing story of Jesus' birth to a story of "more," more toys, more things. We've traded away the best story in the world for what's on sale.

In our lessons from Romans and from Matthew today, we are told to "wake up." Instead of sleepwalking through life, instead of just going with the crowd, wake up to what we are doing, to how we are living, to what it's doing to us, to our families, to our relationship with God. We may be lulled into consumerism's enticements to "eat, drink, and be merry." But God's wants more for us than senseless hedonism. God wants more for us than more stuff. At Christmas God gives us Himself. That's God's answer to consumerism, not "presents" bought gifts, but "presence," God with us.

If we keep that in mind during this season, if we remember God's gracious coming to us, it'll go a long way in influencing how we live these next few weeks. It'll shift our focus from life-absorbing shopping lists to Christ's life-altering significance. Instead of buying into the hollow promises of consumerism, it'll give us a fresh look at God. It will alter the whole season and transform it from a holiday into a Holy Day.

That is my hope for you all this Advent season. That you'll resist the urge to spend more, that you'll be a part of the resistance, part of the conspiracy, "the Advent Conspiracy." That's a strange idea—conspiracy—isn't it? Doesn't sound particularly Christmas-y. Well, the Advent Conspiracy was a name some pastors came up with a few years ago. They felt like they were somehow missing Christmas – that the folks they served were missing Christmas – that our whole culture was missing Christmas. They felt that the way we prepare for Christmas sets us up for nothing but a giant letdown when Christmas day arrives. And so they crafted the Advent Conspiracy. They said,

“We all want our Christmas to be a lot of things. Full of joy. Memories. Happiness. Above all, we want it to be about Jesus. What we don't want is stress. Or debt. Or feeling like we "missed the moment". The Advent Conspiracy is a movement designed to help us all slow down and experience a Christmas worth remembering. But doing this means doing things a little differently. A little creatively. It means turning Christmas upside down.”

You've often heard me describe Jesus as one who turns our world, our expectations, our assumptions upside down. So it seems only right that we think about how Jesus wants to turn our Christmas upside down too. The Advent Conspiracy movement has three themes to explore during the season of Advent: Spend Less. Give More. and Worship Fully.

About the first of those themes, Spending Less.... For many of you, particularly those of you who are in charge of your household budget, this probably comes as a welcome topic. You know, Americans spend something like \$4.5 billion each year at Christmas. That's a lot of money, and frequently a lot of debt. And for what? More often than not, it's for gifts that the recipient doesn't need or even want. At the risk of sounding like one of those “family magazines” in the checkout line, let me suggest three simple guidelines, three principles, that will help us spend less on gifts. They'll help both the receiver and the giver find the experience to be more satisfying and help us turn the holiday into a Holy Day.

#1: LET THE GIFTS YOU GIVE MEET A NEED

Buying presents for my parents and my grandmother is a challenge each year, a real frustration. Because quite frankly, at their stage in life, there's nothing really they need. I always fret over finding something they will each like, that they'll use, and not just another sweater or something they don't need. It's far more satisfying when you give a gift that actually solves a problem and meets a need. The sense of joy and gratefulness in the eye of the receiver is obvious and you leave knowing you have genuinely blessed someone ... and God has blessed you in the process. So, let the gift you give meet a need.

#2: LET THE GIFTS YOU GIVE BE MEMORABLE

I suspect that every one of us can think back to a handful of gifts that we have received that really impacted us. Most of those gifts probably were not very expensive. There was instead something personal –an emotional investment by the giver that made the memory. It is impossible to accomplish that with every gift we give, but I do think that seeking to do so enriches the gift-giving for everyone involved.

There was a little boy at a missionary school who gave his teacher a Christmas gift. The school and village were located miles and miles from the coast, yet the boy's gift was a sea shell. The teacher knew he had to travel many hours by foot to get this particular shell. The teacher's initial response to the gift was “OH! You shouldn't have gotten me this beautiful shell. You had to walk too far to get it!” The little boy replied, “The long walk was part of the gift.”

Gifts that are memorable are gifts that come from the heart not just some object checked off of a shopping list. They need not be expensive – just sincere.

And that leads me to my final principle ...

#3: LET THE GIFTS YOU GIVE BE MEANINGFUL

The best gifts are ones that are given with love, not from obligation. They are given sacrificially too. For the good of everybody, let's stop with the obligatory gift-giving that consumerism has imposed on us. Retailers have successfully made us feel guilty if we do not give extravagantly and universally. But we should seek to give gifts that are from the heart – that are meaningful. Give gifts that show the receiver that the person means something to you. And give gifts the receiver can readily assign meaning.

Let me share with you how NOT to do this. I have a friend who actually gave his wife a wiring harness for their Dodge Durango as a gift. That way, he explained, they could pull the boat to the lake on weekends during the summer. Well, the gift was certainly one that was meaningful to him ... but it failed the second part ... it had no sense of meaning whatsoever to her.

Now, here's someone who did it right. This fellow gave his wife an airline ticket to go see her aging mother. She was scheduled to go see her in late spring anyway but now she could see her mom twice within a few months. This was a gift that was sure to create memories; it showed that the husband understood his wife's (and mother-in-law's) needs, and it could not have been more meaningful to a daughter who longed to see her mom in the sunset of her life. That's a gift that was really meaningful.

Gift giving is an ideal way to show someone they are valuable to you, to show how much they mean to you, a real act of love. In giving his Son, God showed us a perfect example of One who gives good gifts, gifts that (i) Meet Needs, (ii) are Memorable and (iii) are Meaningful. As we enter this season of Advent and we look for ways to show our love to others, I invite you to reflect on how your gifts can better express your love and better reflect the amazing love God has shown us in Christ. By taking this path, this challenge, becoming part of the Advent Conspiracy, we will find we can celebrate Christmas more fully, more faithfully, more joyfully, not just as a holiday, but also a holy day. Thanks be to God!