

Thanksgiving is over now, long past. We've had Black Friday, small business Saturday, cyber Monday, tickle me Tuesday, Weeping Wednesday, Throwback Thursday, Follow Me Friday and all the other sloganed days designed to make us buy things. Fact is, this time of year is a difficult time, time full of peril, of danger. You've got all this pressure, pressure to buy the right gift. You don't want to *over-give*, but you don't want to *under-give* either. Someone you know gives you something nice and you're like, "Oh, sorry, this is all I got you." And it's worse if you've started dating someone. 'Cause gift-giving can really define your relationship. "Hey, here I got you a diamond necklace." "But we've only been dating two weeks." There's a danger at this time of year!

All this pressure! How did we get here? Where did it start? Really, why *do* we give gifts at Christmas? Ever thought about it? Well, I guess you could go back to the Magi, the Wise Men. Soon after the birth of Jesus, these Magi showed up. And they've brought gifts—Gold, frankincense and myrrh. They've come to end of their long journey, found the child they're looking for and they give the gifts out of gratitude, out of worship, of Jesus. Did you notice that? They don't give the gifts to each other. They're not giving each other expensive gifts at the manger. "Melchior, congratulations! Here's a flat screen!" "Thanks so much. Here's a new camel." That's not what happened. These Magi, they show up, and give gifts *to Jesus*. That's certainly part of the tradition.

What else? Santa Claus, of course. Jolly old Saint Nick. But who was he? You know that there was a real Saint Nicholas, right? He was a bishop from around 300 AD, in Myra, a city in what we know today as Turkey. He came from a Christian family; his parents taught him to love Christ. They died when he was young, leaving him with some considerable wealth. But he didn't coast on the family money. He used that wealth to make a difference in people's lives. In his most famous story, Nicholas helped a poor man who had three daughters, but could not afford a proper dowry for them. This meant that they would remain unmarried, maybe even become prostitutes. Hearing of the girls' plight, Nicholas decided to help them. He went to their house under the cover of night and threw three purses (one for each daughter) filled with gold coins through the window. According to one version, one of the daughters had washed her stockings that evening and hung them over the embers to dry, and the bag of gold fell into the stocking. Hence the tradition of Christmas stockings. So yes, Virginia, there really is a Saint Nick.

And then by the 13th century, you have these French nuns who are giving gifts to the poor in honor of Saint Nicholas. You go a little further, into places like Scandinavia and Germany and England, and they all have their own pagan winter customs and they start layering more and more onto this legend, till you get to around 1900 and you have this bearded, jolly fellow in red that we're familiar with. By the 1920s in America, advertisers get ahold of him and decide they are going to use him to define what Christmas is going to look like. And from there on out, the

figure of Santa has been used to sell everything from Coca cola to candy to Dodge cars. But there really was a historical person, St Nicholas.

Is there anything else? Well, why is it we give gifts on December 25? Because it's Jesus' birthday? Not really. No one knows when Jesus was born. (More than likely Jesus was born in the spring. Shepherds were not out watching their flocks by night in winter.) No, the date December 25 actually goes back to a pagan festival in ancient Rome. Years before the birth of Jesus, the Romans held this end-of-year celebration called 'Saturnalia,' in honor of the god Saturn. It was a week-long celebration dedicated to over-indulgence, gambling and drinking. Here's an ancient description from someone who was in charge of the festivities: "During my week the serious is barred; no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, that is the point, noise and games and dice, appointing of fake kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping of tremulous hands, an occasional ducking of faces in icy water." Sounds like a frat party, doesn't it? But there were really good things that happened at Saturnalia too. People gave to the poor, they took care of those in need. And, because all the markets and schools were closed, families would be together, they'd sing songs, they lit candles, they brought pine branches into their homes to decorate and they gave gifts to each other. Sound familiar? So there was something good that was going on there. But still at its core Saturnalia was just dark—people getting drunk, running through the streets naked, men wearing women's clothes or animal hides as if they were beasts. It was just weird.

When the Christians came along, they're looking at all of this, and they're saying, we don't believe in all these gods, these idols. And we don't want any part of this revel-making. Getting drunk, getting naked, acting like animals—that's not right. So what are we going to do? What if we did something subversive? What if we conspired together and did something revolutionary? We don't really know when Jesus was born, so, while everybody else is worshipping a false god, what if we just instead use this time to worship and celebrate and remember Jesus' birth? That's what was happening in the early church. And by the 4th century, Pope Julian made it official. And that's how Christmas came to be December 25.

Some of you are probably hearing this and thinking, "Wow, if this all goes back to pagans, should we just throw out the whole thing?" That's what some Christians thought. Remember the Puritans—the folks with the pointy hats, buckles on their shoes—they're so uptight, they just say 'no' to everything, in the name of Jesus. In 1645, in England, the Puritans cancelled Christmas, outlawed it. They did the same thing when they came to this country. Should we be like the Puritans? Or should we line up with the early Christians who took this pagan thing and turned it upside down, made it holy, made it so that it takes people back to the story of Jesus?

That's what the Advent Conspiracy is about—trying to reclaim the holy in the holiday, the saintly in the season. The Advent Conspiracy was started by a couple of pastors a few years ago, and today it's a global movement of people and churches who resist the cultural push to buy things, by choosing a revolutionary Christmas through Spending Less, Giving More, and Worshipping Fully.

Last week we talked about the first Spending Less, and this morning we're talking about Giving More. You're probably thinking, Wait, how can you spend *less* and give *more*? Well, consider this. I know I've given you this whole history of Christmas presents, but who do you think it was

who started gift-giving at Christmas? St. Paul he writes about it in Romans, chapter 8: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him* up for us all.” And then there’s the most famous verse in the Bible: “God so loved the world that he *gave* his only Son, that those who believe in him should not perish.” God *gave*! This gift has been foretold for centuries. Isaiah, chapter 9: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is *given*.” God could have sent a message, maybe a list of things to do and not do, but instead he sent his Son. And in giving his Son, God made his gift personal. Personal, in the sense that Jesus is a person. But also personal in the sense of being relational. God gave his Son, so that we could be in relationship with Him. He can know us and we can know him.

Imagine if this Christmas you gave gifts that reflected the personal nature of God’s gift, gifts that represented your desire to get close to someone, to spend time with them, to get to know them better. You see, when we make time to be with someone, it’s a gift in itself. I just heard a story about a business man whose father really loved coffee. The business man was always busy and hardly ever spent time with his father. But one Christmas he decided to do something about it. He gave his father a bag of gourmet coffee beans. And written on the bag was a note saying, “Dad, you can only drink this coffee with me, when we’re together.” The gift was more than just the coffee, it was a gift of his son’s attention. And you can imagine the impact of that gift went farther than those beans. You can imagine that whenever he made coffee afterwards, he will think of his son. “Giving more” is then about giving not more stuff, but rather *more of ourselves*, more of our time, more of our love, more of our attention, more ‘presence,’ less ‘presents.’

As a result, the gifts we give—should we choose to give *things*— will show that we pay attention to the other person. We’ve all gotten gifts that showed the giver didn’t give any thought to who we are, what we like or need. “Oh, great... a membership to the kombucha-of-the-month club, thanks...” And likely we’ve given some of those gifts ourselves, often as last-minute presents because we need to give *something*. But how precious would it be to give something like what this father gave to his teenage daughter.

A father and his daughter were enjoying their last Christmas at home before she left for college the following summer. For the father, the days were beginning to blur into weeks and the little girl he was bouncing on his lap just yesterday was going to leave tomorrow. What did that father give his daughter that Christmas? He gave her two beautiful blank journals, with these instructions: she was to fill one, and he’d fill the other. During the next year, which would include her final days of high school, an all-too-brief summer, and her first semester away from home, they both commit to writing—writing thoughts about leaving home, questions and fears, frustrations with overprotective parenting, what it meant to let go, and how it feels to watch your child become an adult. And the next Christmas, they’d exchange their journals.

Two empty journals for Christmas—*that’s* what a daughter got from her dad? How impersonal might such a gesture appear at first glance—and how inadequate! But no gift could have been more relational, more personal; and no other gift would stand a chance of being appreciated so warmly or remembered for so long.

Oh, to be sure, personal, relational giving can be risky. What if they don’t like it? What if they don’t understand our intent? What if they don’t appreciate the time we put into expressing love

for them? This too is a part of the gift that is Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus gave himself, knowing full well that some would reject or misunderstand him. And so Part of relational giving is accepting that our heart-felt gifts simply might not be appreciated. Hopefully they will be, though, as often even the crustiest of hearts will soften with such personal gestures.

One last thought—when we consider buying gifts, let me suggest that you look not just to your family and friends but beyond them, to those who really need help. A few weeks ago, I was reviewing the Advent Music Playlist I've created for Good Shepherd, to see if I should add any new songs, when a song came on entitled "The Rebel Jesus." I've heard the song before, but this time I was caught up short by the lyrics: "And once a year when Christmas comes, we give to our relations, and perhaps we give a little to the poor, if the generosity should seize us." I don't know about you, but that phrase, "if generosity should seize us," the "if", is convicting. Why is it that we focus on our own, when there are those whom no one else claims? Marcia—if I can tell on you—Marcia shared with me last Sunday, that when she first heard of the Advent Conspiracy years ago, she was inspired to shift her and Chuck's gift-giving, to focus less on things and more on experiences with her family members. But also she started giving gifts to charities like the Heifer Project and World Vision in the name of her loved ones. If you have someone who is hard to shop for, perhaps you could consider buying a cow or a flock of chickens for a family in Africa or Central America, in your loved ones' name. Imagine their surprise when they find *that gift* under the Christmas tree!

The point is, the point of the Advent Conspiracy, is the story of how Christmas changed the world. Shouldn't it change us, change how we relate to others? Shouldn't it cause us to "bear fruits" as John says in our Gospel lesson today? In Jesus, God gives us the most priceless and personal gift of all. He gives himself. This simple truth is why giving is still a good way to celebrate Jesus' birth. It also points to a way out of the chaos that Christmas has become, and takes us back to the joy that can still be found at the heart of this amazing story. Thanks be to God!