

The Gift is in the Giving December 7, 2008

I heard a story about a mother who took her children to a restaurant. Her six-year-old son asked if he could say the prayer before eating, and his mother told him “yes.” He prayed like this: “God is good; God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen.”

It was impossible for the other customers not to hear the rather loud prayer, and one woman sitting nearby remarked, “That’s what’s wrong with this country. Kids today don’t even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!”

When the six-year-old heard this, he burst into tears, and asked his mother, “Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?” His mother assured him that he had done nothing wrong, and that God certainly was not mad at him. She was continuing to comfort the child as an elderly man approached their table. He winked at the little boy and said, “I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.” “Really?” the child asked. “Cross my heart,” said the man. Then, in a theatrical whisper, he added while pointing to the woman whose comment had started this whole thing, “Too bad she never asked God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.”

We all know how this story ends, of course, because how could any mother not buy ice cream for her child after all that?! However, what we could not anticipate is what happened when the little boy had his sundae in his hands. He stared at the ice cream for a moment, and then picked it up and without a word, walked over and put it in front of the woman. With a big smile he said to her, “Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.”

We could go in all kinds of directions with that story, but I’m going to choose just one. That one has to do with the ice cream the little boy so wanted, and what he chose to do with it, and why. Clearly, he wanted ice cream for dessert, and he wanted it badly enough to ask God for it. However, he gave his ice cream away, and to a woman who had not been very kind toward him. What was going on with that?

Let me tell you what I think it was—knowing full-well I could be dead wrong. My intuition tells me that a six-year-old is much more astute than many of us give him or her credit for being, and he “got” what the older gentleman said to him about the woman needing a little thing like ice cream for the soul. And my guess is the child decided that the ice cream was more important for the woman than for him. With an act of uncommon generosity he gave her the gift of his ice cream.

Now, what does this have to do with Christmas, and with the gifts we are probably trying to get around to buying? If you’re anything like me, you dread getting out to the shops, because they’re crowded, even in these

economic times! Online shopping is an alternative, of course, but it still takes time to make our selections. Sometimes gift giving seems to be a huge hassle, and it’s hard to find the positive, the good side of it.

I think part of the problem is that we’ve got this whole gift-giving thing backwards. We see it as something we have to do, and there may not be much joy in it. If that’s where we are, I fear we may be missing the point when it comes to what giving is all about.

There was an article last year about this time in *The New York Times* that was about this very thing. The writer was Yara Parker-Pope, and the article was entitled, “A Gift That Gives Right Back? The Giving Itself.” She began by telling the story of the death of her mother a few years before, and how she and her siblings had been discussing all the ways life would be different without their Mom. One of the things her brother said was, “No more presents.” Apparently their mother had been a prolific gift-giver. Although her kids had urged her to stop giving presents and spend the money on herself, she would have none of it! She just liked giving gifts.

The article went on to say something I was surprised to find out—that gift giving has been a favorite subject for studies on human behavior, and has been a topic explored by psychologists, anthropologists, economists and marketers. Everyone seems to have a perspective of one sort or another on the subject, but the overriding consensus was that gift giving is a complex and important part of human interaction.

Frankly, I had never thought of gift giving in that context—that it has something important to do with the quality of our interaction with one another. The article clarified the importance of giving gifts by saying that the very act itself helps define relationships and strengthen bonds with family and friends. While it may be tempting to cut back on spending during the holidays, especially with the economy the way it is, psychologists say that banning gift exchange with loved ones is not the best solution. If we were to decide to eliminate giving gifts, we’re told that we miss out on an important connection with family and friends.

Throughout history, the act of giving gifts has been seen as having social value, and being vital to our human development. For thousands of years, some native cultures have engaged in something called potlatch—a ceremony that celebrates extreme giving. In some settings, the status of a family in a clan or village was dictated not by who had the most possessions, but instead by who gave away the most.

Anthropologists believe that we have evolved in such a way that gift-giving has become a natural part of who we are. Although we’re all different when it comes to giving, it does seem to be part of our human nature—the need and desire to give—to give of our possessions, our wealth, ourselves. In fact, the biggest impact of gift giving may be on us, because giving to others reinforces our feelings for them and makes us feel effective and caring.

How giving impacts us, the givers, is part of what our Bible passage for this morning is trying to help us understand. The writer Paul wants us to know that it is important that we cultivate a generous spirit in order to live out what it means to be a loving person. The most important thing is the spirit in which we give.

The passage from second Corinthians says this: **Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure, for God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.**

Paul says to us that we are to make up our own minds as to how much we will give, but then we're cautioned, **"Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure."** A cheerful giver, he says, is one who gives freely and generously, not because others are looking, or because we will be recognized, but because our hearts tell us it is the right thing to do. Richard Braunstein put it like this: **"It is possible to give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving."** Our Bible passage would say that true giving comes from a life filled with love, because when we love, we give.

So, how does this impact us as we think about our gift giving this year? I would suggest that it is really all about the quality and quantity of love we have in our hearts. It's not that the more love, the bigger gift; it's that the deeper the love, the more lovingly we reflect that love—not in price or quantity, but in our care and support. This Christmas, I hope we'll each examine our own hearts, and give from the heart to those dear to us, to those organizations that do work we care about, to those individuals and groups that have impacted and improved our lives.

I hope the way in which giving reflects our care and appreciation for someone or something causes us to think differently about what's important throughout this entire season. Let's not just check off items from our list, but lovingly focus on the one to whom we are giving, and then just let our love flow. I'm talking about the kind of giving that transcends our selfishness, focuses on the other, and helps each of us reach toward our highest self.

By presenting a gift to a loved one, a friend, a family member, an organization, we are saying we are overjoyed at being able to give, and the very act of giving is, indeed, the gift. Our gift says we care, and it speaks volumes of our love and appreciation. So, as we prepare our Christmas list, let's thoughtfully consider the people and organizations on our list, and then let's enjoy the opportunity we have to give our gifts, and to live out our best selves, knowing that our lives and theirs will be blessed in the process.

Closing:

The writer of the Book of Acts said he was quoting Jesus when he said, **"It is more blessed to give**

than to receive." Whether or not Jesus actually said that is a moot point. What really matters is the simple truth that the gift, the real gift, comes in the act of giving. That's what it's all about.

This morning, we're doing exactly that. As you leave, please enjoy a meatball, accept it, and let us experience the gift of giving. How could we not have meatballs????

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.