

“Giving Christmas Away,” December 9, 2007

The Bible passage this morning is the part of the Christmas story that tells of the three wise men going to visit the baby Jesus. Those three are often misunderstood, as one child did when he assumed the three were firefighters. When his mother asked him why he thought that, he said that he heard in church that the three came from “afar.” Now in some versions of the Bible, including the one this child heard, we read that they “came from afar,” but that means a long way off. Apparently that child was from somewhere near my hometown in southern Indiana where I’m from, that’s how we pronounce the word “f-i-r-e,” so I can understand why the child thought they were members of the fire department.

However, they weren’t. They were what we often refer to as astrologers, people who study the stars, and according to the story, they observed a star that they believed was noting some special kind of occurrence, so they traveled to the place where the star was shining most brightly. The story tells us it took them to the place where Jesus was, and that they were so overwhelmed by the love they witnessed there between mother and child, and by the love they themselves felt in that space, that they fell to their knees in worship. Then, because of that intense love that they had experienced, they opened their bags, and presented mother and child with the most costly gifts they had to give—gold, frankincense and myrrh. While those are pretty impractical gifts to offer a child, they represent the kind of gifts they felt moved to give out of the love they experienced.

Some would tell us that was the first example of giving Christmas gifts, but my sense is that giving has changed dramatically, if that is indeed the case. My guess is that many of us are going to give out of a sense of obligation rather than love, and that we might be somewhat perplexed trying to figure out exactly what it is that we’re going to get certain people.

I sometimes find myself in that place. Even though our official gift list is rather short, there are those who are difficult to buy for, and it seems to be more of a chore than a joy. I wonder if it’s that way because so many of us have most of what we need to get by in life. We have clothes to wear, food to eat, a roof over our heads, and meaningful work. Other than those basic needs, how much do we really want for, or need?

For years, the group of friends with whom we gather many Sunday evenings exchanged gifts at Christmas, but then it became more and more difficult to come up with ideas of what people wanted and/or needed. So, a few years ago, we tried

something different. As a group, we took a couple of the families that ~~“Gave Lights”~~ ~~“Gave Lights”~~ on Christmas unless folks like us helped. That experience was so positive for us and for the families we helped that we decided to continue that tradition.

Last year, some of us chose to help families again, while others decided to go through Heifer Project to provide a cow or pig that could provide food long term as well as a way to earn a living for a family living in poverty in an impoverished nation. We’re going to do similar things again this year, and we’ve discovered that to be a better way for us to spend our time and money.

Giving is something everyone of us can do, but we don’t all do it. Some of us probably don’t believe we have anything to give, or we think that what we have to give won’t really matter. It’s easy sometimes to think that the problems in our world are so massive that nothing we do could ever make a difference. Maybe no one has shown us how we can help, or maybe we’ve just never been asked. I suppose one of the basic reasons many of us fail to give part of what we have to help others is that we think we’ll get more out of life and find more personal enjoyment in life if we hold onto our money for ourselves and our families.

Some of us recognize the name of Warren Buffet, who’s a billionaire many times over. Recently, he’s made news because he has chosen to give 95% of his wealth away for worthwhile causes. I’ve heard folks wonder what his children think of all that, how they respond to having “only” 5% of their father’s wealth to get them through life. Bill Clinton’s book, *Giving*, shares Warren Buffet’s philosophy about that very thing. Buffet says he wants to leave his children **“enough so they feel they could do anything but not so much they could do nothing.”**

What do you suppose he means by that? My hunch is that he wants his kids to know that there are no obstacles standing in their way, like a lack of financial resources, obstacles that some find as huge roadblocks to moving forward toward equipping themselves for life. Buffet intends that their life path can be whatever they choose, but they are not going to receive so much wealth that they can afford to do nothing with their lives. I’m sure that Buffet wants his kids to understand that life is not for frittering away, or lounging on the beach on some deserted island, even though there are times that sounds heavenly. Rather, life is about making a meaningful contribution, about living in a way that makes the world a little better for our having been here.

That’s why Buffet has chosen the route he has, and that’s why you and I are discovering the value of sharing who we are and what we have with others. Giving is what we do best, once we learn how to give. I was surprised to read in Clinton’s book the extent to which many Americans already

give. According to the statistics he cited, 70% of American households and increasing numbers of people around the world give some money away every year. In 2006, Americans gave almost 2% of our Gross Domestic Product, about \$300 billion, in usually one of three ways: to our place of worship, to an emergency with profound and highly publicized needs like Hurricane Katrina, or to other local fund-raising activities, like United Christmas Service in the Indianapolis area. In terms of our time, almost 84 million American adults give time. In fact, the total time giving exceeds the hours put in by more than 9 million full-time employees, worth a dollar value nearly \$239 billion! We are generous people.

So, how can we go about giving Christmas away this year? What can we do that can make a difference in this world? Frankly, the possibilities are endless, and they can range from the simplest things to the more grandiose, but I'm not sure it matters the how great or small our giving is. It only matters that we begin now in some way to share of what we have with others.

Money is one of the things we first think of, of course. And as usual, The Garden is making an appeal, along with numerous other benevolent causes. I do hope, if you are finding some benefit in what goes on at The Garden, that you will be able to help us make our way and continue to grow and flourish through your financial donations. We count on a large portion of our yearly income arriving during this last month of the year, and this year is no exception, so I hope you can respond out of love and help us out.

Another of the causes that Stan, the Power of One, and others of us at The Garden are enthusiastic about is Neema Children's Home in Eldoret, Kenya. Those who have been to Eldoret have met Miriam and Joshua, and know the good work they are trying to do to provide a home for children who have been orphaned due to AIDS, or who themselves are HIV positive. This is a huge problem on the continent of Africa, as well as in India, and help is needed. If you would like to help provide care for a child, you can do it by making a donation to the Power of One.

I mentioned Heifer International a bit earlier. This is an organization that is working to end world hunger by giving cows, goats and other food and income-producing livestock and agricultural good to poor families around the world. The animals are bought locally to maximize resistance to local diseases and to help local economies. Then they produce milk, eggs, wool and meat, enhancing nutrition and earning money for education, health care, better housing and small business endeavors. In many ways, supporting Heifer International is like giving a gift that keeps on giving.

Last year in the local newspaper, there was an article about people locally who are putting their spirit of generosity into action. One honor society

threw a Christmas party for children in a friend's IPS school first grade class. The shoeboxes of gifts were mostly practical things, with maybe a small toy or a candy cane thrown in for fun, but the kids squealed with delight and rushed to show their teacher.

Another part of that article told of a 9-year-old who knew that his mom's company was helping a downtown child care center with gifts for its families. Then he saw that one boy was asking for basic things, like hats, gloves and jackets, and he was shocked. Jacob Johnston of Zionsville said, "I felt sad for him because he didn't get toys," so Jacob began selling some of what he had to raise some monies, and he took the cash he gathered to a dollar store and bought 35 teddy bears for the kids at the child care center. He even passed the bears out himself, and watched the kids jump up and down with joy.

We can all give, in these ways or in a myriad of others. We are giving when we focus our full attention on another person, not being distracted and distant. We are giving when we show respect for our brothers and sisters near and far. We can give the gift of reconciliation when we have become separated from someone we care about; we can do that by being the first to say I'm sorry and ask for forgiveness. We can offer the possibility for a new beginning to someone who seems hopeless and distraught by opening doors and windows that allow the light to shine through.

We can do any or all of the things and many, many more. The needs are great, and the possibilities for us to share a little love and fill some of those needs are even greater. It's all about loving care for one another. We have it; will we share it? I guess we'll each have to decide that for ourselves.

CLOSING:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray our answer to the question I asked is "Yes...yes, I'll share of who I am and what I have, and make this world just a little bit better." I hope that's the answer.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.