



January 2012
Volume 85 Number 1

Dear Friends,

Giving and Receiving If all goes according to plan, we will still be in the Christmas season (which lasts until January 6) when you receive this.

For most of our culture, Christmas is over by December 26, sometimes by the evening of the 25th itself. But for us, the season goes for twelve days, not twelve hours. And, of course, to try to maintain the level of high drama and intensity of the 24th and 25th would make us all crazy, so what are we to do with the other 11 days? I think observing the full season of Christmas offers us an opportunity to reclaim the true gifts this season has to offer, and especially has to offer to adults.

Perhaps at the heart of receiving the true gifts of Christmas is some clarity about our relationship to it. We tend to think of Christmas as a subset of our lives—we decide how to observe it, we choose what to do, we shop and we entertain, and our goal is to have, make, or give, a good Christmas. And perhaps our hope is that it will be an island of joy or peace or harmony in the midst of lives in which those feelings may be in short supply. We celebrate Christmas, this thinking goes, and then we go back to our real lives, reluctantly if the Christmas was good, and with barely concealed relief if it was otherwise. We can observe Christmas or not and celebrate it the way we choose—it's basically our call.

I propose another view.

Christmas and the Periodic Table of the Elements Christmas is not a subset of our lives; we are a subset of the life of God in which Christmas is a prominent element. Like the rest of God's creation—gravity, the periodic table of the elements, the finite nature of human life—Christmas is something which is, whether we acknowledge it or not, and its nature and identity are what they inherently are, not whatever we might choose to make them. When we view Christmas as something we make or do, what we are looking at is not Christmas at all but something else.

Christmas is a gift we receive from God. In recognition of that gift we might well choose to echo that experience by giving to others. But if we do not first experience the “receiving,” then the “giving” will never be Christmas. And if the gift is not from God, then the holiday we observe is not Christmas. My sense is that what most people observe is not actually Christmas, and then we are puzzled why all of the joy and peace which Christmas promises seems to evade our grasp year after year.

Giving may be the easy part Paul observes that Jesus said, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35) In addition to being more blessed, I think it may also be significantly easier to give. I wonder if part of our difficulty in experiencing Christmas as it really is derives from our difficulty in receiving a gift from God.

The best gifts—and none of us always reaches this level—show understanding of the needs of the recipient and a deep understanding of what delights them. A gift which meets a need but does not delight is useful, but does not reach that highest level. Similarly, a gift that offers passing amusement is not a failure, but neither is it the best we might do. As Don Taylor observed in his Sunday address back in November, there are few feelings as good as giving the perfect gift.

In the perfect gift there is an equilibrium of joy between giver and recipient. If I am the recipient, I feel that the giver has understood who I am and what I value—the gift is a sign of being genuinely known, and also a sign that the giver’s primary goal is to lift up my heart, a heart which they know and understand. When, in the Baptismal Covenant, we say that we put our whole trust in God’s grace and love, we are, in effect, saying that we trust God to give us the perfect gift—we trust that God had the ability, the knowledge, and the desire to give us what we most need.

But then there’s the Dark Side Gifts which may not be so perfect sometimes seem to be given (consciously or otherwise) to discharge or impose obligations. I do not think it is a bad thing to acknowledge an obligation by the giving of a material gift. Sometimes it is meet, right, and our bounden duty to make an offering. But giving a gift to impose—rather than acknowledge—an obligation is not to give a gift at all. In that instance, the gift may be an attempt to elicit something I desire from the recipient, and so the gift is a contradictory message: I give you this because I want something from you, and if you are not grateful for the symbol which imposes this obligation on you, you should be ashamed. Perhaps some of the resistance to acknowledging the presence of God in Christmas comes from the belief that if we accept the gift, we will then be bound by rigorous rules and expectations which will not feel like a blessing.

It is the rare gift which comes completely free of overtones. Maybe another element of the complexity of gift giving is that we see in the transaction a symbolic expression of elements of the relationship between giver and recipient which are awkward, or even painful, for one or both. If I give you something which I really want for myself, is the message that I see you primarily as a means to advance my own interests? Or, perhaps more subtly, do I desire to give you the perfect gift not to delight you, but so I can glory, even if only to myself, in the status of being a Really Good Gift Giver? And if I give you something which you do not like, the object stands there as a constant reminder that I was not paying attention, I lacked insight, or I did not make enough of an effort to get it right. Credit for trying is modest consolation.

The Dog and the Manger....So where might we find guidance through this especially complicated situation? Perhaps in going back to Christmas itself we might see some clues about how better to

observe the holiday. Rather than trying to make Christmas in our image, what if we were to pattern our behavior on what God does and shows.

For example, Christmas celebrates more God's coming in person than giving objects in abundance. What if what you have to give is something of yourself more than something you might buy. Jesus as an adult gives few material gifts. When he gives bread as a symbol in the Gospel of John, the people, to his exasperation, focus on the bread—the material gift—rather than the meaning he intended it to convey (John 6:26-27). But though he gives few objects, no one would say he gives few gifts. Block out the incessant drumbeat to bestow happiness through shopping and buying, and consider what you might give by being present, by paying attention, by seeking to offer a better life.

(I hope this Christmas to spend some time with canine friends, and I think dogs may understand Christmas better than many humans. The only thing that dogs have to give is themselves, and with what they have they are remarkably, sometimes overwhelmingly, generous. They neither sow nor reap, they neither shop nor order, and yet no one in all their wealth gives more than they do. Imagine how you would feel if everyone was as glad to see you as your dog. As Jesus says in another context, go thou and do likewise.)

In the Christmas story, Joseph and Mary each have their doubts and anxieties, but they trust, and depend on, one another and go forward. They keep calm and carry on. Who on your gift list might need a companion, a real conversation, someone they can trust, more than an object?

Mary and Joseph make do with what they have. A stable or a cave is not anyone's first choice for a birthing room, but if that is what you have, that is what you use. Perhaps they were not thrilled with their choices, but they focus on what they have—a child—not what they don't, an ideal place for the birth. Maybe having shepherds troop through their quarters within hours of giving birth was not Mary's first choice, but she and Joseph seem to welcome them. Somehow they have the grace to work with what they have.

Maybe Mary knows what she's talking about.....Perhaps that wisdom is at the heart of Mary's response to God's messenger: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38)." The angel departs at that point because Mary gets it—she understands who God is, who she is, what their relationship is, and she sees that unequal, but holy, relationship as a blessing and a gift. Mary does not work hard to be religious; she sees clearly the way things really are. Perhaps Christmas is a time when, following Mary's example, we might work hard to look deeply into our lives. And, if we look deep enough, I suspect we will begin to see how God is there at work. And, beginning to see what our lives are for, we might begin to think about how to get onboard with what God desires for ourselves and the world. Maybe peace and good will for ourselves is to be found in learning what it means to say, from the heart, "Behold I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to thy Word." Mary makes no demands, does no negotiating, makes no strategic life plan, nor does she insist on her own way. And yet she exuberantly rejoices in a feeling of being blessed, favored, and honored. In that paradox there may be clues for ourselves.

The Puritans in the 17th century, and their spiritual descendants later, were famous for trying to "purify" Christmas by banning all sorts of traditional customs and celebrations. And I by no means wish to join their ranks. I delight in decorating for the season, in entertaining, in sending and receiving greetings, and in exchanging gifts. But—and especially with children—I invite you to be

clear in your own mind about what people most need and desire, what you most have to give, and what will genuinely make a dark world a brighter and more welcoming place.

Now, while we are still in the season of Christmas and in its epilogue, Epiphany, while the (pagan) culture has moved on to other things, let us have our own slightly subversive observance of Christmas as it actually is, that we might all receive the gifts it genuinely offers.

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