

“Spend Less, Give More”

November 23, 2014

John 1:1-5, 14

This Sermon was preached by Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and Jesus Christ, the Word who dwells among us.

Today we continue a three week series called, **The Advent Conspiracy**¹. This conspiracy encourages us towards the counter cultural act of keeping Jesus birth *center* stage in all our holiday activity. Last week, Pr. Kurt invited us to Worship fully this advent, by taking up the worshipful attributes seen in the key players of Christmas: Could we in these next five weeks be like Mary who offered, Joseph who obeyed, the angels who adored, or the wise men who bowed? he wondered. This week, with the cultural norm of Black Friday shopping staring us in the face, the Conspiracy’s challenge is this: to let that gift of Jesus’ birth inspire us to *Spend Less* at Christmas, and yet *Give More* this year.

Gallup's November 15th spending forecast finds Americans expecting to spend on average \$764 on Christmas gifts in 2014, up from \$704 last November, with total spending—when you combine gifts, tree, decorations, food, travel --- totaling more than \$450 billion.

What’s on your list? *Who’s* on your list? Are you excited? Stressed? Or somewhere in between at the thought of Christmas shopping, wrapping, giving, *returning*?

One famous Christmas movie personality felt strongly about gift giving at Christmas. I want to make clear, this is not who we are trying to be this Sunday: (Movie Clip, “The Grinch” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_4LmbuSmpI)

While he’s a little bit grouchier than most of us, and I wouldn’t go so far as to declare the whole season, stupid, our green friend does challenge the prominence that gifts have taken in this holiday. For all the fun and joy that presents can be, I wonder this: How many of you remember what you received for Christmas 5 years ago? One year ago?

I want to acknowledge that when we talk about our habits of giving and receiving gifts, we are wading into personal territory. Because gift giving is one of the significant ways that we try to show our love for one another—and love is always personal. When we talk of gift giving, we’re also taking economics. Perhaps you’re thinking that our economy relies on consumer spending. If Americans do not spend, then other Americans could lose their jobs and suffer. Hundreds of thousands of people will gain employment this holiday season because of gift buying.

To the personal nature of gift giving, spending less on Christmas presents doesn’t mean we love our friends and family any less and the Conspiracy is not trying to take Christmas traditions away. Economically speaking spending less does not mean spending nothing.

¹ The idea for this series and some content comes from a book by Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder called, “Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?”

Rather, the "Spend Less of Advent conspiracy is a challenge to thoughtfully evaluate what we are supporting with our spending; the impact our gift has on the receiver, and whether or not we are taking our gift giving cues from the gift God gave in Christ.

The truth is, while given with very good intentions, and while that moment under the tree together can be almost magical, the gifts we give one another are often excessive, impersonal, and easily forgotten. Sifting through piles of things we don't need and may never use, something deep inside tells us we missed it—whatever it is our soul longs for this time of year. Many reach the end of the Advent season with an aching emptiness.

And so, to rebel against some of this craziness by spending less, can simply seem right on many levels. Let's spend less on meaningless things! But the challenge doesn't stop there, for gift giving in itself can be beautiful: The full challenge is to Spend Less, but also Give More—of what really matters. How do we do that? What does that moment look like on Christmas morning? What impact does that have on the givers and receivers beyond that day?

On Facebook this week, I asked my friends: "What is the most meaningful Christmas gift you have received?" A few sample answers: 1) Kristen: a quilt from her parents, bought at an auction to support her favorite Bible camp 2) Lindsey: the mini-loaf of banana bread given to each grandchild 3) Kaitlin: a VHS tape from her sister, of a movie they had adored as children 4) Sara: her parents went away for a vacation and grandma and grandpa came to stay 5) Nan: their son, born over the holiday 5) Andrea: a marriage proposal, outside of church in the snow, after Christmas eve service.

I wonder how you would answer that question. What was it that touched you? Why do you still remember it today? This is just a guess, but you probably aren't remembering a gift card for a shop at the mall or a huge diamond bracelet hanging on the tree. For most of us—the special gift we best remember is a different kind of gift—a relational gift. The best gifts celebrate a relationship.

The reason that a father keeps a simple frame with a picture of his girls glued in the middle isn't because it's an expensive work of art. It's because his daughters gave that gift specifically to him, and they created it with their own energy. When the father looks at that particular gift, he's reminded of two girls who love him and a relationship that he's still celebrating.

I don't know if it happened gradually or was it just that we've never stopped to think about it intentionally before, but even worship-every-Sunday Christians have drifted from this liberating, straight forward truth of Christmas season: God's answer to the world's problems has never been material things. God did not send down stuff, God's gift was himself.

And so, what if we worked to make our main inspiration for giving gifts at Christmas be the reason for Christmas himself, Jesus Christ. What if we let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, as Philippians said today, and we asked of any purchase we make: "what do you think of all of this Jesus? Is how we are celebrating your birthday what you would have in mind?"

In words of poetry, the gospel writer of John tries to describe the first Christmas gift that was Jesus, or the Word (capital W): *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* These words are epic, a bit abstract—but get to the heart of this radical and risky act of love that is the incarnation. John continues to this critical line: “The Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.” That is, a universe sized God, who had no reason to need to do it, chose to become one of us: with skin and bone and voice and heart. This epic sized God, as Alan Hirsch said, “ moved into our neighborhood in an act of humble love the likes of which the world has never known.” This incarnation is what we celebrate when we gather for worship, what becomes tangible as we share bread and wine. It is the reason for the season, for in the incarnation, God draws near.

What can we learn from the Gift of Jesus about giving gifts at Christmas?

1) God gave us his Presence. “Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel” we sing. “Emmanuel,” we repeat each year, and remind one another that this means ‘God with us.’ But do we allow that Emmanuel reality to permeate the way we live during the Advent season? Could it be possible that even our gift giving could be drenched with this beautiful moment when God gave us his presence in a unique, flesh-and –blood way? In the era of shared google calendars and off-the charts monthly family agendas-- time is perhaps our most precious commodity. We have a need to be *with* each other, to hear another voice, to see another face, to hold another hand. When we make time to be together, our presence is a present: a relational gift.

2) The Gift of Jesus was Personal.— the announcement of the angels in Luke’s gospel says, to *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. A savior is born for *you*—a very personal gift. We’ve all given and received gifts that were less than personal, generic disposable gifts that partially scream, “I haven’t thought about you in a long time, but I still felt obligated to give you something.” Relational giving means we pay attention to the other person, we think about who they are and what they care about. It’s not the size or cost that matters—but the content. In case you’re wondering, yes, this is a more difficult way of giving gifts, but

3) The gift of Christ was costly.

As we heard in the first reading from Philippians, in Christ God emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant. He did not force his way into our world as a powerful king, but came in the humblest of ways, a way that led to a cross. The gift God gave cost God everything. What that tells us is that relational giving will cost us. While not to the depth of Jesus—for none of us can go that far—relational gifts will cost our time and energy. It would be easier to stop by the store or go online, grab a gift card, or buy something ‘in the ballpark’

Spending Less and Giving more in a way that honors Christ at Christmas takes intentionality and planning. What would it take, this weekend—before Thanksgiving and black Friday—for you and your family to sit down/talk on the phone and put some Christ-centered parameters around Christmas presents? To help you get started, I invite you take out the pink insert in your bulletins: 20 ideas for relational non/toy gifts. These are all real examples we found from other

families who have committed to a more simple Christmas, many because of the Advent Conspiracy. Here at Trinity, we begin the Christmas sharing project and gifts that give this week, which are further options. Whatever you come up with as a family will be the most meaningful. I'll never forget the year my siblings and I did a 3\$ spending limit on gifts for one another.

My prayer for you is that *this* Christmas, you might experience moments of relational giving your friends and family will care about and remember. That the children in your life would learn from you what it means to give gifts that matter. That your neighbors or co-workers would watch you celebrate Christmas differently, and through that hear the good news loud and clear through the seasonal static: The Word became flesh and dwells among still, us as gift. A Gift for your family, *and the whole human family*.

That's the fourth thing that we learn about God's gift of Christ –it was for All.

How do we worship fully, spend less, give more, *love all* this Christmas? That's next week's theme.

God bless you this thanksgiving week; God bless your travel and family time; God bless the decisions you make about gift giving this year.

Amen