

“Give More”

The Advent Conspiracy, part 3

Isaiah 41:17-20 and John 6:1-15

[65] – Give More video clip

[66] Before we begin, I want to remind you of a significant opportunity we are offering here this afternoon. Our “Quiet Christmas” service will begin at 3pm here in the sanctuary, and it will be streamed online. This service is designed for those whose grief and pain needs to be shared during these winter days. While we rejoice in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we have an opportunity for healing and comfort this afternoon for many, especially in the pandemic, who mourn. Please come and support those who are grieving, and invite someone if you think they would appreciate a moment of peace.

[67] I have a secret to tell you this morning. Lean in a little bit. Christians are not perfect. I know! It’s a scandal. But if you came into this place this morning, thinking, “Wow, this church must be full of super-Christians. These people have it all together!” ...can I be the first to say, I’m sorry. We are broken people. We make mistakes. But what we have learned is that God takes our humble offerings and turns them into something incredible to bring him honor and glory. We don’t have to be perfect; God is already perfect. And I think we can all take great comfort in that thought.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, placing your hands palms up in front of you, ready to receive a revelation from God. Let’s pray.

Lord of heaven and earth, we come before you this morning, not trusting in our own strength or good deeds, but in the power of your unfailing love and grace. Show us your Son, Jesus, that we may worship him with the same passion and fervor as the shepherds on that first Christmas. Help us to cast off any anxiety that would keep us from experiencing you this morning. We are ready to listen to your Spirit. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[68] We have been talking about the “Advent Conspiracy” the last two weeks. We’ve reflected on the most meaningful gifts we have ever given and received, and how our culture has taken a high holy day and made it into an excuse for wastefulness and hyper-consumerism. We made a promise together that we

would reclaim Christmas for its original purpose: to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, who gave himself to the world. We talked about ways to Worship Fully and Spend Less in time, money, and stress. It is a challenging idea; that’s why they call it a Conspiracy. Our hope is that by taking time to slow down and reflect on Christ, we will make habits that will last a lifetime and change our hearts, our families, and our world.

[69] Has someone ever given you a relational gift? What I mean is, has someone ever given you something that didn’t cost a lot of money, but it cost thought, time, and energy? Let me give you an example. Just before Katja and I married, we made each other advent calendars. Even though it was May, we made these big calendars with little doors and put little notes and gifts inside each door: memories, things we were looking forward to when we joined our lives together. I remember in one of the boxes, I put the small plastic ring I gave to Katja the night we got engaged – right before I actually gave her the real diamond ring. Each day as our wedding drew nearer, we opened a door for a special, intentional, thoughtful gift, most of which cost us no money at all.

I remember another time when I gave a relational gift that really impacted me. When I was a freshman in high school, I went with my youth group to Renosa, Mexico. Now, that mission trip cost me a lot of money, time, and energy. We built a small house, a shack, really, for a family to live in. But that wasn’t the most the memorable part. It was giving the children piggy back rides while we were there. These children were curious, they were excited to see a group of “gringos” from America. As our group did a Vacation Bible School for these kids, and they just became enamored with us. Piggyback rides cost no money, but they were worth every drop of sweat to hear these kids laughing and giggling as we carried them around the street. It was a relational gift that was mutually given.

[70] The Bible tells us in Isaiah 41, the poor and needy are all around us. They search for safety. For water. For food. And Isaiah 41:17 says, “The Lord will answer them.” God is ready to act. God is ready to provide abundant food in the desert. Look at the imagery here. The desert becomes pools of water. Parched ground become springs. Cedar, acacia, myrtle, olive, pine, fir, cypress – expensive, useful trees, will grow in the wasteland. God’s kingdom is about abundance where there is scarcity, hope when things seem hopeless.

[71] How can someone provide water in the desert? Don't we say, "That's impossible!"? For people, sure, but with God all things are possible. And 1st Corinthians 12:27 tells us, we are the Body of Christ. We are the hands and feet of Christ. Take for example our partnership with Salvation Army. We are answer the call God has given us. When God says he is going to provide food for the poor, God does it through us!

Last week we said we should Spend Less. This week we are saying, Give More. That seems like a contradiction. How can we spend less, and at the same time, give more? Isn't that a paradox? It is, if you are only focused on money. It is, if you buy into the lie that Christmas is only meaningful if you attach a dollar sign to it. But if you realize that you are the one by which God works miracles in this world, then suddenly you will look at your resources a whole lot differently. You spend less in order to give more.

[72] Think about the miracle in John 6, the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples, they thinking about scarcity, lack of money. Jesus asked them, where are we going to buy bread for all these people? He was testing them. He was asking them, do you notice what I notice? Do you see what I see? A great crowd who needs love, compassion, and literally, something to eat.

Philip answered Jesus, "Even if we had 8 months' worth of money, we couldn't buy enough for them." (John 6:7) We're broke, Jesus. It's too much. We can't do it.

We can look at the world's problems today with the same pessimistic attitude. "It's too much." "Pastor, one person changing how they do Christmas is not going to make a difference."

But someone did notice. The disciple Andrew found a boy had a lunch they can use. Five small loaves. Two fish. A snack. He knew his lunch was meager. He knew it wouldn't go far in his own hands. But he had the faith to give it to Jesus, and Jesus did a miracle with it.

That's what "giving more" means. Not spending more money. Spending more time. More relationally. Giving what you do have. That boy's gift fed thousands because he trusted it to God. He thought hard about it. Maybe he was prepared to go hungry for the rest of the day, so that Jesus could use his offering. Because of his faith, there was abundance in the desert.

[73] Christmas giving should look the same. We should resist buying the easy, thoughtless gift, or going into debt so that we can have a wrapping-paper frenzy on Jesus’ birthday. It doesn’t make sense. But sometimes we are so entrenched in our culture, we don’t even know what’s happening.

Would it look weird to give a relational gift? Probably. One time, my organist once gave me a small bag of cookies with a scripture verse attached. I thought, “That’s cool.” Then, I saw she made bags for every choir member. I thought at first they were identical to mine. But she had chosen a different, unique verse for each person. I was blown away. Think of the time, effort, and thought those gifts conveyed.

[74] That’s how God gave to us at Christmas. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.” Notice the word, “gave”. Jesus was a gift to us. Jesus was the most amazing, most thoughtful gift the world has ever received. From the beginning of time, God had been thinking, “What would be the best gift to give to this world?” Why doesn’t the Bible say, “For God so loved the world, he gave everyone a new car?” Wouldn’t that have been OK? Or maybe, “For God so loved the world, he gave everyone a new donkey...one hundred dollars...a new Lego set.” That’s not how God gave. God gave of himself. God gave in a relational way. We call the birth of Christ the Incarnation, God made flesh, living, breathing, dwelling among us. Now, that’s a great gift.

[75] Maybe this Christmas, when someone asks you what you want, you can say, “A glass of water.” But not for you. For someone in the desert. You could support Living Water International (water.cc/advent) and become part of God’s plan to provide abundance in the desert.

Maybe you do want to say, “For Christmas, I want a donkey. Or a cow. Or a pig.” Heifer International (www.heifer.org/) is just one of dozens of international relief organizations that help families sustain themselves through gifts of livestock.

Maybe you want a new baby for Christmas. Through World Vision (www.worldvision.org/) or Compassion International (www.compassion.com/), you can sponsor a child. The options are endless.

We are not saying, "Don't give gifts." Gifts are good. But we are saying, "Say no to debt, to meaningless gifts, to hyper-consumerism." That's not Christmas. Instead, say "Yes" to love, to meaning, to the children of God who have nothing.

A good gift causes you to slow down, to savor. A good giver is someone who notices. We must learn to "pay" attention. God noticed what we needed. And God gave us himself. My prayer for us all is that we would learn to give of ourselves the way Jesus gave.

[76] Let's pray.

Memory verse

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Reflection questions

1. When you were a child, what kind of gifts did you give people?
2. What is the difference between an obligatory gift and a relational gift?
3. When has someone given you a relational gift instead of a traditional gift?
4. How is the giving of Jesus Christ a relational gift from God to us?
5. How is giving to the poor a way to give to Jesus?
6. How can you spend less and give more this Christmas?

More information and ideas are available at www.adventconspiracy.org