

THE GIFT OF GIVING

Dec. 11, 2022

With Rev. Richard Maraj

MESSAGE

So I want you to think about: What is the thing that you love most and enjoy most about Christmas? And what is your favorite Christmas tradition? Is it putting up lights? Is it hanging the wreath? Is it decorating the tree? Is it putting the angel on top? Is it baking cookies? Is it going caroling? Is it sending cards? Is it kissing under the mistletoe? Is it taking pictures with Santa? Is it drinking eggnog?

These are all wonderful, wonderful traditions, but I would say we could still have Christmas without them. We could have Christmas without a tree or decorations or sending cards. We can have Christmas without the Nativity scene or going to church or lighting a candle. But there is one thing that, if we didn't have, Christmas would not be the same. Christmas wouldn't feel the same without the tradition of giving gifts.

Can you imagine Christmas without gifts? Christmas without gifts would be like peanut butter without jelly. Like bread without butter! Like a burger without fries! Like Adam without Eve! Like Bert without Ernie! Football without a ball. [Congregation laughs] Phoenix without the sun! You could tell; it just wouldn't make sense. It would not make sense.

Gift giving and its tradition with Christmas -- we automatically assume is connected to the three wise men bringing gifts to the newborn king. Which reminds me: What did the wise men say after they presented baby Jesus with gold and frankincense? They said, "*Wait! There's myrrh!*" [Congregation moans and laughs] Okay. Okay, so you're moaning and it's well deserved. But I'll still bet some of you retell this joke by this afternoon or by tomorrow sometime. [Congregation laughs] Maybe!

The practice of giving gifts at Christmas actually comes way before Jesus' birth. In the Book of Ester, there's mention of a Feast of Purim, which is celebrating the victory of the children of Israel. It says, "*Observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*"

Most of the customs that we have with Christmas today didn't come from Christianity. It came pre-Christian and from non-Christian traditions that we've adopted over the years. Saturnalia is a Roman festival that happened in the middle of December. And it really is a prototype of how we celebrate, with feasting, giving gifts, lighting candles.

In Turkey in the 4th century, St. Nicholas -- a famous Christian bishop -- was famous for how generous he was to people who were less fortunate, and especially to children of all denominations and backgrounds. You know why? Because he wanted all children to be able to savor childhood and have fond memories of being young.

And the gifts back then were really simple! They were like homemade anything. Sometimes they were giving an orange. A lot of it was food; sometimes it would be socks or a blanket. It was very simple. And over the years, things have been added. Victorian England added the idea of family gifts. There are a lot of different things that have had influence.

And we can't pretend that commercialism and consumerism, materialism has not played a role in impacting how we buy gifts and how we engage in that. We can't pretend that it hasn't created some undue stress and obligation and pressure. But with all the things that have been heaped up about Christmas and its traditions, I would say without a doubt, I think Christmas is a good thing. Because it's really gift giving and Christmas come down to one thing, and it's about love. Sharing love. Expressing your love and care and consideration for the happiness of well-being of one another ... not only our family and the people we're close to, but to people in need.

There's a very strong connection between God love and giving. We're told in the Book of John that God is love. It also says that his love -- and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. The

greatest commandment is to love God; love others; love our neighbors; love our enemies; love ourselves. Love is mentioned 300 times in the Bible. For 300 times!

Interestingly, giving is mentioned over 300 times in the Bible. God is love, and God's nature is to give. *"God so loved the world he gave his only son." "It is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom."* In Philippians it says, *"If you're lacking in anything, ask God, who gives generously."* Jesus said, *"Give and you shall be given."*

You know, Jesus didn't really mention getting a lot, but he did mention giving a lot: giving love; giving kindness; giving compassion. Why? Because Jesus knew that giving is a Law and it activates the energy and creates a circulation and increase of good in all of our lives. That when we give love, it increases the good: increases the love and the joy; and the connection and the harmony; and the peace and the compassion.

I would say we are most alive when we are giving love, because that's our nature. Remember what it was like when you were giving a gift, and you just felt so much joy giving that gift and expressing love to that person in that way. To me, giving is a gift that blesses and enriches all of us.

Mother Teresa once said, *"It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you."* You know, we say it's the most wonderful time of the year. And it is! But any time could be the most wonderful time of the year. Christmas is the one time we actually consciously give ourselves permission to be more caring. To be more loving, more giving and more generous. And I can be a little cynical about Christmas, but I'm very thankful that Christmas has this ... because at least we have a time where we intentionally and consciously use the giving of gifts to express love.

So today we're going to look at three things that can help us connect deeper with the gift of love and the gift of giving.

The first one is that: **WHATEVER YOU GIVE, YOU'VE GOT TO INFUSE IT WITH LOVE.** Story of this little girl; she gave her dad a gift. Dad opens it up; the box is empty. And the father wants to teach the girl a lesson. He says, *"Honey, when you give someone a gift, you shouldn't just give them an empty box. You should put something in it."*

The little girl started to cry and said, *"Daddy, the box isn't empty! I blew a hundred kisses in it for you."* [Congregation: "Awww."] And so the father's heart melted and he held his daughter, and he realized she just taught him about the true spirit of Christmas and the true spirit of giving. It is the love inside that counts.

Sometimes we have so many people on our list, we just buy it; wrap it; give it. Buy it; wrap it; give it. Check it; check it; check it. And then sometimes in the rush, I don't think we can infuse as much love into it when we're that hurried. Even though we have a good intention to buy them a gift, I think we could do it more consciously and intentionally.

How many people -- what's that book? Tidying up things? Marie Kondo? Everybody familiar with that? One of the things she says is that, for whatever you have in your house, is hold it. And if it sparks joy in you, keep it. And if it doesn't, you give it away.

So my thought is: Take the gift that you're going to give to whoever, and infuse it with your love. If we could feel joy from holding a gift, we could infuse love into each gift. We could think of that person -- and think of how much we love them and appreciate them and the difference that they make in our lives. We can infuse appreciation and thankfulness. We can infuse all kinds of blessings into the gift. And I guarantee you that that will make a difference.

The Lebanese writer Kahlil Gibran once said that all work, all giving, all actions and words are empty unless there is love. That unless we infuse love, we're just kind of going through the motion.

In the Old Testament, there were 713 codes of behavior. And there was always a question about the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. There are things that we can mechanically do, but there are things that we need to do with our spirit. That's what Jesus was always saying: invest your spirit and your love into everything you do.

diminishes our joy in giving when so much thinking and stress is going on in the act of giving and expressing our love.

In 2 Corinthians, Jesus talks about loving a cheerful giver. And the whole idea about that is to not give with obligation. To not give with reluctance. To not give with attachment. Because when those aren't there, then you can really experience joy: the real joy of giving. But when you attach it to those things, we diminish our joy of giving.

The pure joy of giving comes from not having any attachments or feeling obligated.

"I am a cheerful giver no matter what."

Together: [with congregation] *"I am a cheerful giver no matter what!"*

"I let go of all attachments."

Together: [with congregation] *"I let go of all attachments."*

"I am a joyful receiver no matter what!"

[With congregation]: *"I am a joyful receiver no matter what!"*

"I let go of all attachments."

Together: [with congregation] *"I let go of all attachments."*

If you want to experience the joy of giving, we've got to let go of all those attachments. And, in fact, we should really celebrate and give thanks we have the opportunity to express our love through the gift of giving.

The final one is we need to **GIVE OURSELVES THE GIFT THAT WE NEED**. Have you ever had a Christmas that was disappointing? Where you not only didn't get what you wanted, but you felt like you did so much work, and it wasn't acknowledged or appreciated? You didn't feel that who you love loved you up as much as you would have liked? You didn't meet the man of your dreams, like in the Hallmark movies? [Congregation laughs] You spent Christmas alone and quiet? Or there was some family tension?

You know, sometimes we blame other people for why our Christmas -- or our lives -- aren't going as well as we would like them to go. But the truth is -- the bottom line is -- at some point we need to fill our own cups. We need to give ourselves the love that we need ... and the support and the encouragement and the appreciation that we need and not just be waiting for other people to do it for us.

I have a simple, but profound, question: What's the best gift you could give yourself for Christmas? You might think a nice outfit or season tickets to the Suns games. [Congregation laughs] Nothing wrong with that! But if you go a little bit deeper, what does your soul need? What does your heart need? What does your spirit need?

Maybe the best gift you can give yourself is acceptance. Maybe it's compassion. Maybe it's support or encouragement. Maybe it's being kinder and more gentle on yourself. Maybe it's being more positive with yourself.

Anthony DeMello once said that, *"All suffering is from a lack of love."* And the greatest lack comes from the lack of love from ourselves.

Do you remember *A Charlie Brown Christmas*? Where he bought that really ugly, pathetic-looking tree? [Congregation laughs] And the one thing I remember him saying; he said, *"It just needs a little love to be beautiful."* [Congregation murmurs] I'll bet every one of us has an area in our lives where we're hurting, or it isn't as pretty as that tree. And I'll bet a little love in that area where we feel wounded or lost or hurt -- particularly love coming from ourselves -- will absolutely make that area more beautiful and more positive in our lives.

Greg Tamblyn a few weeks ago came and he performed here. And at the concert he did afterwards, he sang a song about a woman named Evy McDonald. And she had polio when she was young, and she got ALS -- Lou Gehrig's disease. And she was confined to a wheelchair; she was losing control of all her

muscles and everything. And she was given six months to live. And she thought to herself, "Six months to live. What is the best way I could spend these six months of my life?"

And she realized that she really hated her body and she hated her life. And so what she did for herself: She would go in front of the mirror naked, and she started listing all the things she hated all about her body, about her life, she couldn't stand. And she wrote them down.

And then she wrote a list of the things she liked, which was very short. But every day for 20 minutes -- three times a day -- she would be naked in front of her mirror and looking and accepting the fact that she held these horrible feelings and thoughts about her body. Began to find acceptance and peace and ask for forgiveness from her body.

And every day she would add one more thing she liked about herself. One more thing. And after three or four months of this, she started feeling a sense of peace. She started feeling a sense of joy; she was enjoying her life.

And then Greg met her and wrote a song. And the chorus I really like. And it's about her singing, and about what she needed. And it goes like this:

*She said it's something called unconditional love
Supposed to be really wonderful stuff
And if you can get enough, you can find peace
So in the time that I've got left
I've got to find some for myself
I believe unconditional love is what I need*

The amazing thing is: She did this practice of loving herself every day a little more and more. She was actually the first person to be healed of ALS. [Congregation murmurs] And even if she wasn't, those six months of her life were well spent, giving her the thing she needed most. And it was her unconditional love.

Could you imagine loving yourself a little more than you currently do? Being more nurturing and positive, more honoring and respecting, respectful and supportive of you? It doesn't sound like a big gift, but I guarantee you it's a huge gift. Because it affects every other area of our lives, and all the things that we give and receive and experience.

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. It is an opportunity to love and express our love through giving. And we can do that by infusing love in whatever it is we give, whether it's an actual gift or a card or whatever. Infuse your love; blow your hundred kisses into that. The second is to give with joy. Have no attachments. "*I'm a cheerful giver no matter what! I'm a joyful receiver no matter what!*" Don't rob yourself of the joy by being too attached. And finally, give yourself the love that you need. Fill up your cup yourself. Because that'll make it a great Christmas.

If you want to have a great Christmas, we can all do it if we are willing to express our love through the gift of giving.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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