

**Advent 3**  
**Dec 13, 2009**  
**Luke 3:7-18**  
**The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**  
*Giving*

The Advent Conspiracy continues with the topic - giving. For the past two weeks we've been conspiring together to celebrate Christmas in a way that restores its revolutionary roots. We've joined with hundreds of other churches around the country in an Advent Conspiracy. We're choosing to rebel, to swim against the cultural tide that favors consumerism over Christ leaving so many of us exhausted and empty.

Instead, we're choosing to worship the Christ-child fully, allowing the signs and symbols of Christmas to point us back to the Savior. Today, as we continue to live subversively this Christian lifestyle, I want to challenge each one of us to give one less present this year and lots more presence.

Do you know how much money we spend on Christmas here in America? We spend around \$450 billion on Christmas each year. The American Research Group estimated an average of \$907 is spent per family, \$450 billion.

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time comprehending a number that big. So let me put it into perspective. Stacked in one dollar bills, that amount of money would rise 30,540 miles high. If we turned that stack on its side it would go the whole way around the earth and then some. (The circumference of the earth is just under 25,000 miles -- 24, 901.5 miles at the equator.)

Put another way: \$450 billion would equal 2,647,058,823,529 (that's trillion) meals through Feed My Starving Children ministry. That would be enough food to feed 7,252,215,955 (that's billion) children for a year. That's more than what the world population is right now.

Whoa! So here's the question: What gift do you think Jesus would want for his birthday this year?

Now, before you think I'm going all "bah humbug" on you, consider the challenge I put before you today: give one less present and lots more presence. That's the theme behind our reading for today. So let's turn there now (*read Luke 3:7-18*).

To put it mildly, John the Baptist was a really interesting guy. The people of God hadn't seen a prophet in nearly 400 years. John didn't exactly reintroduce them to the prophetic tradition in a gentle way.

Today we would call John a real fire and brimstone preacher. And maybe he had to be. It would be like one of my children running into the street as a car was coming. My tone of voice would be loving but not timid. It would not be like this (sweetly), "Oh,

don't run into the road." No it would have some tone to it, like this (loudly) "STOP!!!! DON'T RUN INTO THE ROAD!!!!"

That's John the Baptist. He calls all people – peasants and princes, religious and non-religious alike – to stop sinning, to repent, to live differently. John called people to live subversively, to swim against the cultural tide. That's because the Kingdom of God had come. The King of kings and Lord of lords was in their midst.

That's the good news of Christmas – that God is with us, Emmanuel. It isn't that God came to rule over us. God came to be *with us*, to live *among us*, to *love us* to death and back to life again.

In Jesus, God has chosen to be present with us in a relationship of love and trust. God loves us and trusts us. What? Yeah! God loves us and trusts us. That's the message behind John's prophetic words. That's the point of Christmas – love and trust!

God's presence with us is THE present of Christmas. And it's a radical gift that calls for a change in the way we live our lives. I'm suggesting a change in the way we celebrate Christmas this year. Jesus came not to give us stuff but to give us himself – a living presence.

Wait a minute... If a living presence and life-giving relationships are at the heart of Christmas, shouldn't our celebration reflect that?

What's your fondest Christmas memory?

I would guess it has something to do with a relationship, time together with those you love. Why then does so much of our Christmas celebration focus on stuff? Why do we buy so many things that people don't really need, with money we don't really have to spend on Christmas?

Several years ago Paul Harvey reported on a story about a couple in England. The husband was dying of kidney failure and, as it turned out, his wife was a perfect donor match. She donated one of her kidneys to him. The surgery went perfectly and the man recovered quickly. And so, as only Paul Harvey could say it, "Not only did he feel like a new man; he also felt like a new woman." Six months after the transplant the man left his wife for another woman.

Can you imagine? This woman risked her life so that her husband could live, and that's how he responded. He left her for someone else.

How could he do that? One would think that kind of love and loyalty would be so powerful that man would be called to a radical new way of living, starting with a renewed gratitude for the gift of life, and deeper love for his wife. But it didn't.

I couldn't stop thinking about that story after I read it and I began to wonder if perhaps I'm like that man sometimes when it comes to my faith life – my relationship with Jesus. God sent his only son into this world to live for me, to die for me, to conquer death for me, so that I might live with him now and forever. But so often I turn my back on God and allow so many other things to become more important to me than the One who loves me the most.

Does this sound like you too?

The way we celebrate Christmas can distract us from THE gift. The gift of God's presence in our lives ought to renew our gratitude for the gift of life and a deepening love for God and one another. But if we're honest – if I'm honest – so often my Christmas celebration has too little to do with Jesus and too much to do with me.

Maybe you can relate to what I'm saying. Maybe you can't. Maybe you've experienced that emptiness though, where Christmas has less to do with a celebration of God's presence and more to do with the giving of presents that others don't really need and we can't really afford. Maybe you too have experienced that emotional letdown in the days or weeks after Christmas, a gnawing emptiness that stands in contrast to the fullness of our closets, and drawers, and garages, and crawl spaces.

You know I really don't need anymore stuff. Do any of us?

That's why I'm so drawn to this idea of an Advent Conspiracy. I believe there is a better way to celebrate Christmas, a way that can bring real joy to those who choose to live it. We can change. We can save the lives of others. And here is a place to start: give one less present and lots more presence this year. Let me explain.

First, I'm challenging each one of us to give one less gift this year, just one. I want to be clear there is nothing wrong with giving presents. It can be a wonderful expression of our love and appreciation for others. Finding the right gift for the right person is an experience that can keep you smiling for weeks. But this year consider giving one less gift, and then take that money and give it away to someone in need.

That may not seem like a big deal, but if we all did this together, it could become a very big deal. In 2006, the first year this Advent Conspiracy project got launched, four churches got on board. Members of those congregations bought one less gift and then used that money to supply fresh water to people in need. They gave. Those four churches gave \$500,000 (1/2 a million dollars).

The next year dozens of churches got on board and bought one less gift and gave over three million dollars. One simple change profoundly changed many lives. That's the power of the Advent Conspiracy.

There are many ways that we can bless the lives of others this Christmas by giving what we would have spent on one present. And you are free to give wherever the Spirit leads you.

Amber and I have a friend and we decided to give her a special gift this year by giving 10 chicks and health and dental care to a child through the ELCA Heifer Ministry. I wish you could have heard the joy in our friend's voice when we told her.

If you and I would choose to give one less gift this Christmas and give that money instead to the feed starving children well, just imagine the impact. Lives would literally be saved. If we gave \$5000 to Feed My Starving Children we could provide nearly 30,000 meals. WOW!

Jesus' loving presence would be communicated in a powerful way. And Jesus would receive a birthday gift that would make his heart glad. And we would receive a gift that no material stuff could ever rival: true joy. Consider giving one less gift and change the world this year. That would be truly revolutionary.

This is over and above your current giving. This is money that you would have spent on a gift and instead give that money to someone in need. Please mark so on your envelope.

Give one less present and lots more presence. The second part, more presence.

If THE gift of Christmas is the presence of God in Christ, then it would seem appropriate for us to celebrate Christmas by giving lots more of our presence, giving more of ourselves, building deeper relationships with those who are important to us. Say "no" to over-spending and say "yes" to giving in relational ways.

In other words consider giving gifts that draw you closer to others. Here are few examples:

1. One little girl gave her grandmother a container of hot chocolate, but the deal was that they would drink it together so the granddaughter could hear the stories of her grandmother's life.

2. Instead of giving his son a Wii game, one father gave his son a baseball glove with the promise to spend more time playing catch together.

3. A husband gave his wife a coupon book with twelve date night options, to be redeemed once each month in the coming year. I like that one...

4. Instead of baking Christmas cookies alone and giving them as gifts, one woman invited several friends over to bake cookies together. I like that one too... you know how much I like Christmas cookies.

You get the idea. Instead of showing our love for others with money spent on gifts, let's express our love through time spent together. The memories we make and the relationships we built will last longer than anything we could buy at the mall.

Finally, consider giving yourself away in service this year.

Jesus once said that he would be found in the least among us. So, if we really want to celebrate Jesus' birthday, we'll find him at a soup kitchen or a nursing home. We'll find him in a lonely neighbor, a hurting acquaintance, a homeless stranger.

How might you serve in ways that bless Jesus this year? With whom could you serve?

More than 2,000 years ago, God invaded this world quietly through the birth of a baby. And the world has never been the same since. You and I are invited to continue that revolution not in big, noisy ways that draw attention to ourselves, but in quiet ways that point us to the One whose love is still changing lives.

Give one less present and lots more presence this year. Change the way you celebrate Christmas, and together we will change the world for Jesus' sake. Let the Advent Conspiracy continue... Are you in? Amen.