

Advent Conspiracy

Week 4 ~ Love All

As we wrap up our Advent series, please allow me to share a lengthy excerpt from the early days of the Advent Conspiracy...

“When the Advent Conspiracy was taking shape, some of us were part of a strategic team that was assessing the water crisis in Liberia. The handful of churches that first caught the vision of what could happen if we celebrated Christmas differently were committed to funneling some of our resources away from overconsumption and toward those who might be considered ‘the least of these’ around the world.

Sensing that our five churches could start to make a difference, we journeyed to Africa with a team from Living Water International, a nonprofit that digs fresh-water wells in places around the world most of us don’t know exist. At times it didn’t seem like we’d be able to reach some of these villages. Bouncing from rut to rut for hours in the back of a Land Rover makes us painfully aware how far removed we are from the struggles of many in this world.

We stopped at a village that, like many others, welcomed us with beautiful smiles and open arms. We were led through tall grasses, away from the village, to what was referred to as their ‘well.’ If it was a well, it was not like any well we’d ever seen. It sat next to a swamp that leached untold disease into the water from which families drew their water every day. This stagnant gray-green pool infested with insects was all these people had. Even as we talked with the village elders, women would casually brush away the film that clung to the top of this water as they filled their pots.

Looking at this water dripping with disease, it seemed all too real. Surely God was leading us. Not only could we push back against hyperconsumerism of our own culture, we could also begin to heal disease that was seeping into this one, and as a result, we could share the story of Jesus, the living water. Everything seemed to be coming together in this one moment. We listened as the village chief told us of those who had died recently because of illnesses that came from drinking this water. Standing with us in our small circle was a man whose son had just died from a water-bourne disease. The faces on these elders were somber and hopeless, almost resigned to the fact that burying their children would always be a part of their lives.

We knew that in several weeks our churches would be taking Christmas offerings. We knew that by partnering with Living Water International, in a couple of months this village would not have to rely on that well ever again. For us this was good news, and we wanted to share it with the chief and his elders.

When this message of hope was delivered—with passion by the translator from the area who was as excited as we were—the weathered face of this honorable elder remained impassive. He simply stared at us.

Even our translator was puzzled by this lack of emotion. When he asked the chief if he understood what this would mean for his people, the answer was unforgettable: “Others have made promises in the name of this Jesus, but they were never kept.’ Here was a man whose hope had dried up and blown away because others had made promises in the name of Jesus that they’d never bothered to keep.

Somewhere along the way, this man and his village were probably told ‘the right things’ about Jesus: how God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. Apparently they were also told by well-meaning Christians that help was on the way, that someone had noticed their struggle. But no one showed up. Nothing changed. Kids were still dying in the village, and the name of Jesus had been dragged through the mud.”

I think this paints a good picture of what the Advent Conspiracy is all about, “...*funneling some of our resources away from overconsumption and toward those who might be considered ‘the least of these’ around the world.*” (i.e. Spend Less, in order to be able to Give More, as a way of Loving All and Worshiping Fully.)

It is rather inescapable, undeniable, unarguable that we (Americans) are wealthy people...especially relative to global standards. It is also easy to see throughout Scripture that God cares for the poor...so much so that when God became human He was born into a poor family. As author Scott Bessenecker says, “*When God voted with his birth, he voted for the poor.*” Matthew chapter 25 also makes it clear that how we treat the ‘least of these’ is taken very personally by Jesus, so personally, in fact, that He regards it as how we treat Him.

The question, then, is what are we going to do with our wealth and abundance...all of which actually belongs to God? Are we going to worship Him with it by using it to take care of those He cares about? This is the invitation and the challenge that we encounter when we take Advent and Christmas seriously and desire to make it meaningful. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give this year—and every year, and all throughout the year—is to exchange our hearts bent toward consumption for hearts bent toward compassion...so that the world may know the Jesus we love.

Hopefully you’ve heard by now that one of the shifts that CUMC is making in 2025 is bringing “Missions” into the operating budget, as opposed to having it as an optional thing for those who want to participate via Faith Promise. Now, with this shift, a portion of all giving to CUMC will go to love those with real needs in practical ways, both locally and abroad. And FYI, in case you’re wondering, our mission giving priorities will revolve around Hunger, Housing, Health, and Hospitality. In the very near future you’ll be hearing more about our mission partners in this endeavor to Love All.

As a reminder, “*We love because He first loved us.*” ~ 1 John 4:19

Possible Discussion Questions

- What people, issues, concerns, causes do you have a heart, burden, or passion for? In what ways are you involved/engaged in helping them? (Or if not currently involved/engaged, what might it look like to take a step in that direction? **If you’re**

looking to get involved in something—either individually or as a Table Group—might I recommend looking into one of our Mission Partners.)

- When you consider “*the least of these*”, who comes to mind? (Or, who do you see as the most vulnerable or oppressed or marginalized in our world?)
- What organizations are you aware of that are addressing the needs noted in the two questions above?
- How would you articulate the connection between Worshiping God and Loving All?
- When we think about the needs and issues facing so many people across the globe, how do we keep from getting overwhelmed and paralyzed?
(Hint for leaders/facilitators: the One we worship gives us the resources, wisdom, energy, creativity, etc. to move us forward and sustain us.)
- How does (or how can) remembering that Jesus was born into poverty affect how you/we celebrate Christmas?
- How can you and your family look outward this holiday season and love others in a practical way?
- Share/describe some ways you have been loved by God.

Soul Training Exercise ~ What Invitation(s) Are You Sensing For 2025?

As the year comes to a close and we look forward to next year, take some time to sit with Jesus and reflect on the past year and envision the coming year. (I’d recommend at least 30 minutes of silence, solitude, and stillness...just breathing, reflecting, imagining. If you can manage more time, that’s even better. Are you sensing any invitation(s) from Him? (Not “resolutions” per se, but changes or desires to pursue.) Perhaps write down whatever you’re sensing.

One of the best ways to make forward progress is to share your intentions with others who can help you discern as well as provide support, encouragement, and even accountability for you.

Lastly, as I sign off for 2024...don’t forget to get your hands on the book for our next series, *What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?* by Skye Jethani, as we prepare to press on together in 2025.