

Advent Conspiracy

Week 3 ~ Give More

Just two days before I wrote this, it was GivingTuesday which is a “*global generosity movement unleashing the power of people and organizations to transform their communities and the world*”. It started in 2012 and is observed on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. While I can certainly appreciate the heart/intention behind it, I find it somewhat odd, maybe a little troubling, that it comes AFTER Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday (all of which are days we are encouraged to spend, Spend, SPEND). It feels like the message is something like, “*If you have any money left after buying a bunch of stuff the past few days, or if you feel the need to assuage any guilt or remorse you might be feeling, give some money to charity...you’ll feel better knowing you contributed to some good in the world.*” (I realize that might sound cynical. I just find the timing...interesting.) Wouldn’t it make more sense if GivingTuesday was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, so we would be encouraged to give BEFORE we spend? Just a thought...

(**Update: According to one source, online Black Friday sales this year were up 7.5%; GivingTuesday donations were up only 0.6%)

So, that’s what’s on my mind as I head into writing about Giving More. Though to be clear, when we discuss Give More in the context of Advent Conspiracy, we’re talking about giving more thoughtfully, more creatively, more meaningfully, coupled with spending less which we discussed last week, SO THAT we can then give more to those who actually need it. (Perhaps another way to describe this week’s topic is *Give Differently*.)

Have you ever considered how gift-giving became the way in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus? Once again, let’s keep in mind that we are never instructed in Scripture to observe or celebrate the birth of Jesus...so any customs regarding HOW we do so should not be considered sacrosanct or dogmatic. The custom of gift-giving actually pre-dates the celebration of Christmas and was a pagan tradition that got folded into Christmas when the observation of Christmas supplanted winter solstice celebrations.

Biblically, the gifts of the magi became a connection point to continue the custom of gift-giving as a way to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Theologically, it is a fitting custom because in the Incarnation God gave the world the gift of His Son. As we unpack the mystery and significance of the Incarnation (God becoming flesh/human) we can learn some important and valuable lessons about gift-giving as we worshipfully respond to the gift of Christ given to us by giving gifts to others. Or, to say it another way, the Incarnation is the model of gift-giving.

The biggest, most important lesson we can learn about gift-giving from God is that the main thing He gave us was Himself. So as we prepare to give gifts this Christmas season, perhaps we can consider how we might give more of ourselves.

This brings to mind, at least for me, the idea of Love Languages, popularized in the book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. As outlined in that book, the Five Love Languages are...

- Words of Affirmation
- Acts of Service
- Giving/Receiving Gifts
- Quality Time
- Physical Touch

(If it were up to me, I would add a 6th Love Language...Food: making food, giving food, sharing food, eating food together, talking about food, dreaming about food...but I digress. 😊)

If we stop and think for even a short time, we can probably come up with thoughtful, creative, meaningful gifts that don't cost much money but communicate to a person how much they mean to us, that we really see and know/understand them. Maybe Chapman's Love Languages can give us a little spark to the imagination.

To drive the point home, think of someone in your life who is likely to get you a gift for Christmas. What would be especially meaningful to you? What would communicate to you that this person really knows you, really understands, appreciates, values, and "gets" you? Does this person really need to spend a lot of money in order to accomplish that?

As our friends at Advent Conspiracy say, "*The best gifts celebrate a relationship.*" How can your gift-giving this year celebrate the relationship you have with the one you're giving a gift to? Is there a way to do it that costs little to no money? Have we lost our imaginations when it comes to gifts, having succumbed to the prodding of advertisers to get us to buy, Buy, BUY? Remember when you were a kid and you made gifts?

Furthermore, if the greatest gift God can give us is Himself, then perhaps, following His lead, the greatest gift we can give is ourselves. What could that look like? Again, following the lead of God...

- God gave (and continues to give) His **Presence**.
- The gift of Jesus is very **Personal**.
- His gift was **Costly**.

Now you might be thinking..."*Didn't we just discuss Spending Less last week, and now you're talking about gifts being Costly?*" Yes we did, but let me ask you this: What is easier for you to give: your time, energy, and attention, or a gift you picked up from the store or ordered off Amazon? And, again, the direction we're trying to move toward is Spending Less on those who don't truly NEED anything (which, let's face it, is most of us) SO THAT we can have financial margin to give to those with true NEED (more on that next week). The way we do that is by being more creative, more thoughtful, in the type of gifts we give...i.e. less materialistic gifts, but more from-the-heart type gifts. This also includes learning to be OK with not obligatorily giving a gift to someone simply because they gave us one. Learning to simply say, "Thank you!" without thinking to ourselves, "Oh, crap, now I've got to get them something."

Or let me ask you this: Do you prefer receiving a gift card, say to a coffee shop or restaurant, or someone taking you out to a coffee shop/restaurant so they can spend time with you? Our friends at Advent Conspiracy remind us, “*Over and over the Gospels demonstrate the relational nature of Jesus. He simply liked being with people.*” So let me ask you this (and this might sound kind of harsh): If you wouldn’t want to spend time with someone, why would you buy them a gift?

Perhaps a way to summarize all this or a way of articulating the conspiracy we are up to is to consider more relational giving over materialistic giving. In so doing we could accomplish two things...

- We could express love in more creative, thoughtful, meaningful ways.
- We could reallocate the money we would have spent to people, issues, causes that contribute to a more just, equitable, sustainable world.

Doesn’t that sound more like what our King who we celebrate this time of year would want?

A final thought from our Advent Conspiracy friends, “*If we can resist the trap of giving easy gifts, and if we can reject the assumption that giving expensive gifts or many gifts is the best way to express love, something else might begin to happen. We might experience moments of relational giving that our friends and family will care about and remember.*”

Possible Discussion Questions

- Who are you planning on giving gifts to this Christmas? What are you planning on getting them?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the custom/tradition of gift-giving this time of year? If you could change or rewrite this custom/tradition, what changes would you make?
- What are some ways you could Reimagine your gift-giving this year?
- What is an organization, cause, issue that is important to you that you’d like to give more money to if you could? (And why is that organization, cause, issue important to you?)
- What is your “Love Language” ...both in giving and receiving?
- How is the Incarnation a model (or perhaps the model) for gift-giving?
- What could giving more of yourself look like?
- Who do you give the most attention to, outside yourself?
- What is a meaningful gift you have received? What made it meaningful to you?

- What was the last gift you made? To whom did you give it?
- What relationships do you want to celebrate this year? How will your gift-giving demonstrate your valuing/celebrating those relationships?
- Describe a time when you gave out of a sense of obligation or reciprocity? Why did you do that? What was at play in your decision making?
- Who would you like to spend more time with this holiday season? How can you give the gift of your presence to someone this season?
- As you consider giving relationally, what excites you about it? What concerns or challenges you about it?
- Where do you see your own creativity most clearly? Do you draw? Write? Play an instrument? How might you use your creativity in gift-giving this year?
- Where has technology impeded your ability to give your presence? Did you check your phone during Thanksgiving with friends and family right there with you?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Meditating on the Incarnation & Giving Creatively

Exercise 1

Have you ever really meditated on what it cost Jesus to become flesh? I'm not just talking about His eventual torture and crucifixion but all the small costs that added up. God Incarnate had to have His diapers changed and learn how to walk and talk. The incarnate Christ had to intentionally hang up parts of His divinity in order to walk in our humanity.

Spend some time meditating on that this week.

If you want to take it up a notch, as you share a meal with someone this week (or if you share a meal together as a family some night this week), have everyone share what they imagine would be a challenge for God as He became human.

Exercise 2

Choose one person who you plan on giving a gift to this year and actually MAKE them something instead...something from your heart that will connect with their heart.