

The White Envelope

John 1:1-14, John 3:16

When you think about the nature of God, what are some of the attributes you would name? There are many attributes that would describe God's character: Holy, almighty, all-powerful, forgiving, compassionate. One of the attributes that we often we read about in Scripture that reflects God's nature is that God is a giving God...It is part of the very essence of God...a God who gives. Listen to the words of a few of the songs we sing about God.

Joyful, joyful we adore thee...Giver of immortal gladness
Great is thy faithfulness...all I have needed thy hand hath provided.
114 Many Gifts, One Spirit...when we fear the future, give to us your grace. In the midst of changing ways give us still the grace to praise.
Chorus: In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise...One Giver, One Lord....

The Scriptures highlight this over and over:

James 1:17 Every good gift and every gift comes from above, from the Father of lights.

Psalms 68:35 Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel; he gives power and strength to his people.

John 6:32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who **gives** you the true bread from heaven.

James 4:6 But he **gives** all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but **gives** grace to the humble."

John 1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he **gave** power to become children of God,

And of course the most familiar verse of the Bible as we read this

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morning:

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.

This is the nature of God...to give and it because of this character of giving, that as followers of Jesus Christ, we also feel this call to be people who give...and so when it comes to this season of the year we declare it as a time to give...like the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus...but somehow this whole concept of giving at Christmas has evolved into one big commercial explosion of buying gifts for one another, a practice that retailers thrive on, but for many of us becomes a stressful and overwhelming experience of shopping and spending. And even though the spirit of the season is giving, for many people feeling the need to give more and more gifts and make more and more purchases, it has diminished the joy and meaning of the real message of Christmas.

And so every year, Joanna and I go through the same ritual which many of you also do...asking each other...Well, what do you want for Christmas this year? And we usually have the same reply: I don't know. I guess I don't need anything. And eventually we try to think of something to help each other out.

Trying to find the right gift can be stressful, and of course there's always the issue of what to do with the gifts we don't want or need. It's amazing how busy store are after Christmas with all the returns. Of course sometimes you feel you have to use or keep something someone gave you whether you want it or not. I read the following story in the Reader's Digest:

My great-aunt Joyce is known for her offbeat taste in gifts. Every year, she has given my family handcrafted kitchen utensils, so we were not surprised to receive a strange present from her – a long wooden, oddly shaped ladle. To spare her feelings, we used it every time she came to visit. A few months ago, she joined us for dinner. We were using the ladle and commenting on how creative

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she was in her choice of gifts. To which aunt Joyce replied: "Nonsense. You're much more creative than I am. I'd never have thought of using a shoe horn to serve stew."

So what about the gifts you will give this year. When it comes to buying and receiving gifts from each other, we tend to buy things that people don't really need, but it's just what we do because we feel we're supposed to do it.

But if the spirit of Christmas is giving, is there some way to transform our giving? Is there some way to get beyond the trappings and wrappings of the season which cause us to accumulate more and more things and discover a more meaningful way to give.

One thing we might consider is looking for ways to give beyond just the material gifts...I still remember the Christmas gift Joanna gave me several years ago...In the box were 12 white envelopes...one for each month...with 12 different activities...It was like going on 12 different dates...one was to go bowling, another to a movie, out to dinner, etc. To me that was so much more meaningful than another present under the tree with an item I probably didn't need. I appreciated her creativity.

This Christmas season, I want to challenge you to think about what you give, and why you give. Obviously we say we give as we remember the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus as an expression of their worship. And we believe that our worship as followers of Jesus Christ can be demonstrated in the way we give to others. And so I wonder if we can look beyond the commercialism of the season, and discover some new way to give this year...to look for an opportunity around you to make a difference by your giving...It could be as simple as writing a letter, making a visit to someone who feels all alone, the giving of our time to help someone with a project. Perhaps taking some of the money you would usually spend on your own family and use it for some special need. Some of the special mission outreaches and gift-giving we are doing here at FUMC during the season could be

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an example/

This morning I want to suggest that we take that same thought into our gift giving this year. That our experience be more than asking for a list and then getting caught up in the hectic pace of trying to fulfill a wish list. But rather we would at least find one way to make a special gift by fulfilling a need.

That's why you will find a white envelope in your bulletin this morning. It is connected to a story that I want to share with you, a story that may impact our thinking about Christmas giving. It is a story told by Nancy Gavin entitled: "For the Man Who Hated Christmas." *

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the last 10 years or so. It all began when my husband, Mike hated Christmas – oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it, the overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the powder for Grandma. – the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, and ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. And the inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youth were dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together. These kids presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear. It was as luxury this team obviously could not afford.

Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class.

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Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won. They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to that inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed an envelope on the tree, with a note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years, for each Christmas, I followed the tradition – one year sending a group kids with developmental disabilities to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground a week before Christmas, and on an on.

The white envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.

This story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to cancer. But when Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped up in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me, placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. That tradition has grown and will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit will always be with us.

The spirit of Christmas is giving...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. It is so easy in our culture's celebration of Christmas to lose its real meaning and message. But this morning I invite you to think about how you can focus on what the season is

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all about. I invite you to use the white envelope that you will find in your bulletin. I encourage you to pray about how you let it become a symbol of your gift this year. Let me suggest that you can do this in one of two ways. You can use the envelope to insert your gift, like inserting a letter to someone needing encouragement, or a financial gift for a special need, or a note that expresses your intention on how you want to give your time to someone. Or you may give a special gift to someone or something, something you feel will make a difference and then put a note in the envelope and put it on the tree like Mike's family did which will share how you decided to give this year. Either way let this envelope be an expression of a heart to give. I will look forward to hearing from you how you decided to use it. Christmas is about the gift of love God has given. Let us remember the greatest gift given to you and me in the birth of the Savior and let us look for a way to give in Jesus' name.

*Woman's Day, December 14, 1982