



# BE THE GIFT!

One Christmas morning when I was a kid, probably six or seven years old, I was finally allowed to go into the playroom where the Christmas tree stood guard over a fantastic array of boxes wrapped in colorful Christmas paper, shiny ribbons and glittery bows. The tree stood tall, its shimmery lights twinkling off the brightly colored glass ornaments, and fully half the floor was covered in boxes and bags and gifts already set up because they were too big to wrap. These treasures came so far into the room, one could never hope to get near to the tree. This was all too much for the eyes of this child to comprehend, and as I stood there agape, with my older brothers and sisters looking on in delight, I gasped aloud and softly whispered, “It’s Christmas everywhere!”

It will be spoken again this Christmas at every house where one of us Chamberland kids lives. Someone will look at the tree and the gifts that surround it and say with a smile, “It’s Christmas everywhere!” I know this to be true because it happens every year. I used to get embarrassed because I thought they were making fun of me - it was a safe bet, they usually were - but I have come to see it as a brief statement of awe and wonder and appreciation at the reality of Christmas gift giving, the love it speaks to, and the care for others that it represents. That the number of gifts may be over the top, the participation in unbridled American consumerism all too real, and the potential for obscuring the real message of Christmas a clear and present danger cannot be argued, but neither can the fact that it is all done in joyous celebration of the gift of love we all received one Christmas morning so long ago, when God was born as one like us and laid in a humble feedbox.

Once again, we are approaching our annual celebration of Christmas. Once again, folks are baking cookies and stringing lights on their front shrubs and across the eaves. As the winter solstice approaches and our world grows ever darker, we Christians sing about the light that came into our world and prepare to celebrate the “light no darkness can overcome.” Once again, we stand in the full darkness of night and proclaim the morning light. Once again, we will gather with family and friends to celebrate the day that God incarnated as a human so that we humans could become fully one with God.

We know each year as we do so that our celebration is fraught with the human frailty that comprises the human condition. Uncle Hal doesn’t go to Church anymore and has always had doubts about God’s very existence. Cousin Pete’s son is living with a girl, they don’t plan to ever marry, and are tired of being judged. Grandma and Aunt Pat haven’t spoken meaningfully together in years and the tension at dinner can be cut with a knife. We celebrate the victory of Christ over hate, sin and death that can be, at times, hard to catch a glimpse of. We hold candles of faith while beset by the darkness of doubt. We try to practice acts of love when there is little to be found in our own hearts. It is often difficult to believe that, “It’s Christmas everywhere!”

The beauty of the Advent season is that it gives us time to reflect and prepare for the coming of Christmas. It allows us time and space to prepare our hearts for its celebration. When we know a guest is coming to stay, we hustle about preparing the house and making ready the room. Sheets are washed, closets cleaned out, comforters are aired on the line. The same is true as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. We need to dust off the inclination to do good for others that may have sat unused for a while; it may even need a good confession and a little oil of penance to get all the parts moving freely again. We must get rid of any clutter that has built up in our souls and let go of the petty hurts and annoyances that we have let creep in and harden our hearts. We have to prepare a manger in the center of those newly softened hearts to receive the Christmas child.

Where there is no room at any inn, there must be room in each of us to welcome the light of the world and to bear him with humility and hope. For just as he came once to a humble stable in Bethlehem, he comes again looking for welcome and respite from the cold. Just as he arrived naked and unable to care for himself, he comes looking for strong hands of support to carry him, able hands to protect and feed him, and loving hands to hold and comfort him. When he was no longer a babe, he grew to do all those things for us and all who believe in him. Now that we are no longer children in life or in faith, we are called to minister to him once again in the child who longs for life itself and who will need a warm bed, clothes, and education;

in the refugee family that is fleeing persecution and searching for a better life; in the prisoner who longs for justice and, sometimes, simply the hope of a future. When Christ comes in glory, he wants to see that, “It’s Christmas everywhere!”

There is nothing wrong with buying a child too many presents or overwhelming a spouse with lots of gifts. These can be indicators of love that we too often fail to speak aloud, or hints at our remorse over hopes left untended. They are the ways we humans tend to speak of our care and concern for one another. There is nothing wrong with a room so full of presents that one cannot get to the tree, if it is also the sign of a house full of love.

When I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, my allowance was ten cents a week. While I might have “found” an occasional quarter next to my brother’s dresser or received a few dollars from my grandmother on my birthday, the bulk of my regular income came from this generous weekly outlay of cash from Mom. Christmas always presented a problem, however, because of the expectation that we exchange a gift with everyone in the family. There would be no drawing names from a hat for my mother - everyone was to give everyone a gift - and with six brothers and sisters and two parents, ten cents a week was not going to buy a lot. While hand drawn cards were fine for kindergarten, first grade required something really good, something store bought. And so, saving my money from October on, I had \$1.10 when it came time to walk to town and buy eight Christmas presents. Thank goodness there was a candy section at Grant’s and who doesn’t like a Charms Blow Pop - it’s both hard candy and gum!

Mom insisted that everyone give everyone a present because it didn’t matter what one received, it was the thought that counted. The point of Christmas wasn’t to get good gifts, it was to give to others from what one had. While I would have loved some truly awesome things, I am sure, I got a Matchbox car from Kevin that was really cool. And it was fun to thank him for it, watch him blush, and then describe why he had picked out that particular car for me. And I must agree that the best part of the whole process was selecting the right gift for the right person. Since my gifts were all lollypops (except for Brian who loved Five Flavor Lifesavers and Dad who got the same in Pep-O-Mint),

this was simply selecting flavors, but it became an exercise in thinking about the others and what they might like. It was also an early realization that doing nice things for others felt good!

As kids, we can begin to think that Christmas is all about receiving gifts. Hopefully, at some early age, we come to realize that Christmas is actually about the receipt of one gift - the gift of the Christ child - and the new life he opened up for us. In time, we grow to realize that we give gifts to become ever more like the giver. We give, sometime with reckless abandon, because we have received so much and we want to give too. It is a beautiful instinct that we can hone into something even more powerful and revealing of the gift we first received.

As you prepare for Christmas, think about the gifts you want to give. There will be iWatches and Xboxes and jewelry galore, but what gift can you give that best represents the giver? If you have prepared a home for Jesus in your heart, how will the light and warmth of his presence radiate out to the world? Will you welcome Uncle Hal and evangelize him all over again with gentle words of hope? Will you embrace Cousin Pete’s son and his girl and witness to the joy of marriage in the way you cherish your spouse? Will you broker peace between Grandma and Aunt Pat and call them to forgiveness before it is too late?

There are other valuable gifts to be given as well, gifts that cost a little more. As a retired engineer, might you volunteer to tutor calculus at an inner-city school so as to give these kids a fighting chance to succeed in your profession, a gift that will pay back in their families and communities for generations? Imagine giving a gift card to your shut-in neighbor that provides a meal with your family one night a month for a year? It may cost you twelve days of irritation and inconvenience while providing love and warmth to a lonely soul. Providing piano lessons for the child of a single Mom, joining the RCIA team at the parish, teaching teens how to jitterbug, volunteering for the suicide hotline in your town, all are gifts that can flow from your heart. All are manifestations of the Christ Child alive in our world. Each such act of generosity will proclaim loudly that, “It’s Christmas everywhere!”

Be the gift you give this Christmas. Be the gift!