

Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Advent



The Gift that Matters

We are in the heart of the gift purchasing season. I know some of you finished your Christmas shopping on Black Friday, but the rest of us, probably most of us, still have a long way to go. Now, it occurs to me that there are various categories of gifts that we buy. First of all, we buy gifts for those people whom we love deeply and whom we want to express this love to on Christmas. People in our immediate families certainly fit into this category, as well as those who have enriched our lives with their presence. Then there are those people whom we don't see all that much but who we care enough about to want to give them a token of our love. And then there are those people whom we feel obligated to give something to, there is more obligation than desire here. I think we all have those people on our gift lists.

I had gift giving on my mind when I read today's second reading from the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Paul's words were a wonderful gift to the fledgling Christian community at Philippi. Here the great apostle Paul was writing to them telling them how much he loved them and how much more, infinitely more, God loves them. Listen again to this message of Love:

Brothers and sisters: I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. God is my witness, how I

long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

It is quite clear to me, that if we want to give someone a really great gift, what we should give them what Paul gave the Philippians, the love of Christ.

A while ago one of our mothers sent me some thoughts that her daughter had collected when the girl was in high school. She's not in high school now, nor is she one of our young adults in college, but what she wrote at about 15 years old is full of truth and full of love. Some of the thoughts are from St. Francis of Assisi, others from other spiritual writers, and I think a few were her own thoughts. It makes no difference, she made them her thoughts:

Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.

If God can work through me, he can work through anyone.

There are always two choices, two paths to take. One is easy. And it's only reward is that it is easy.

Although the world is full of suffering it is also full of the overcoming it.

And

The more we know the better we forgive. Whoever feels deeply, feels for all who live.

It is easy to be hard and cold towards people, even at Christmas time. We can give gifts that say nothing more than, "I am fulfilling an obligation." We can stew in our anger and our upset over what

has happened in the past. Or we can give the gift of the Lord's love. If we continue to love someone, even if that person has hurt us, even if that person does not respond to our love, we will give a lasting gift. Maybe the person will remain determined to refuse our love, but God's love is powerful. The person who has experienced the love of God cannot help but recognize it. This is how we are called to love. This is the gift we are called to give.

Perhaps, if we swallow our pride and allow ourselves to love others we can join the prophet Baruch of our first reading. He spoke to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon. These people knew that they had brought their suffering on themselves. Like Baruch we need to say to those who are hurting in the own self-inflicted pain: "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." Perhaps, if we set our anger aside we can join John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Lord into someone's heart.

There is nothing greater that we can give anyone than sincerely loving them as the Lord loves them.

The love of the Lord is selfless, sacrificial, and complete. His love is selfless. It is difficult to love in this way, being selfless. This type of love demands that we ignore what the other person thinks about us. We all have people in our lives who respond to our being kind and caring with something like: "So, what got into you?" or "Don't think that I'm going to forget the past just because you are being nice today." It is really difficult to take ourselves and our feelings out of the equation and just allow God to love through us. But we are not important. He is.

The Love of the Lord is sacrificial. It is also difficult to love in a sacrificial way. It is difficult to put someone before ourselves, particularly when that person scorns us. But that is what Jesus did on the cross. He put everyone before Himself, including those people who mocked and attacked him. When Jesus commanded us to take up our crosses and follow Him, He was telling us to love like He loved, even though this type of love, sacrificial love, necessitates a heavy cost.

And His love is complete. We can't love partially or with conditions. We compromise our efforts to give the love of the Lord when we decide to qualify our love, to demand a response of love. For example, if we were to say to an adult child, "I really want you to join us on Christmas, provided you prove you want to be part of this family," we would be qualifying our love. Christ did not do that. He gave himself completely.

We can't find any of this sort of negativity in Paul's gift to the Philippians. He doesn't care what they think about him. He doesn't care what loving them cost him. Nor does he demand anything from them for his love. He simply tells them that he loves them, that God loves them, and that he prays that they will grow in the love of God every day of their lives.

What Paul writes to the Philippians, the Holy Spirit writes to us. We are loved by God who is working in our lives.

How can we give anything more at Christmas than to let people know that they also are loved? They are loved by us, and they are loved by God. What greater gift can we give to others than our prayers that they may grow in the love of the Lord every day of their lives?

This is a wonderful time of year. More than any other time of year, we realize the great joy of Christianity: We live in wrapped in the arms of our loving God, our God who calls us to join Him in loving His people.

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