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Giving And Receiving The Lessons of Christmas

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Your Life Your Health

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On the eve of Christmas, the world's attention, even the secular world's, is turned to the greatest gift ever given, which was the gift of the birth of Jesus Christ. The history of His Life and influence fills volumes. Tragically, the excess of some of His misguided or false followers have sullied that history but even that has not changed the significance of His life, His death and His resurrection. Gift giving at this time of year can be traced back to the gifts given to the new-born Messiah 2100 years ago.

Unfortunately, in the past one hundred years at least, gift giving has itself become distorted to where it is the size and the expense and the number of gifts which has become important rather than the love which a gift reflects. The same motive of greed is at the root of the world-wide economic crisis as everyone strives for more and more, seemingly without any purpose other than that of "getting more." On the other hand, there are major efforts by some to take from those who have successfully "gotten more" and to redistribute it to those who simply gave up and who chose not to compete. Both motives, greed on the one hand, and envy on the other, will destroy a people.

As I look forward to the celebration of Christmas both because of its significance and because of the joy of giving, I recall many Christmases in my life. I recall how meager the gifts were in contrast to today but I recall how rich they were in family and love. I remember the quote published in the recent history of the Buckley family (the family of William F. Buckley, Jr.) where the patriarch of that family stated to his children, "I regret that there is one gift I cannot give you; that is the gift of poverty." He explained that the lessons learned from want and need cannot be otherwise learned and he regretted that his children would not be challenged by both.

In the context of today's excesses, I grew up poor. Fortunately, no one told us we were, so we didn't know it. I never knew need, hunger, homelessness or even fear of these, so how could I have been born? Good question. There were occasions where there was something I wanted which I could not have but there was never anything I needed that was not provided. I do remember the occasion as a teenager when for the first time in response to a request, I heard the words from my father, "We cannot afford that." I think he said it with a sense of regret; I remember being shocked at such an idea. I didn't need the thing I wanted and the lack of it didn't make a difference in my life, but the acknowledgement of limitations and the decision to live within those limitations made a profound difference in my life.

After my father's death, I thought often of my life with him and with my Mother and with my brother. One series of events led me to think about the choices my father made in his life and how a man who had what now seems as so little always seemed always to have so much.

“What is your peculiarity?” In 1983 (is that really over a quarter of a century ago?), as I rode in the back seat of a car on the way to Golden, Colorado to attend the annual meeting of the Christian Ministries in the National Parks, this question was asked of an Assembly of God minister by Cotesworth Pinckney Lewis, Rector of Bruton Church in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia from 1956 to 1985. The question was not asked with malice but it seemed challenging until the Assembly of God minister answered. He said, “We handle snakes!” As three of the car’s occupants doubled over with laughter, Cotesworth said, “Oh, really?” While we commonly use the word “peculiarity” as a synonym for “odd” or “eccentric;” its primary meaning is “distinguishing characteristic.”

In 2004, as my father’s final illness progressed, my brother and I sought the counsel of an attorney. In Natchitoches, Louisiana few things are not commonly known and almost everyone knows everyone. My father lived in Natchitoches from 1949 until his death October 7, 2005 and was well known. While talking to the attorney, he said, “I know your father well; he is a peculiar man.” I took offense to the comment and received a lesson in the preciseness of language. When I told the attorney that I was offended by his reference to my father as being peculiar, he said, “Well, let me see, maybe I chose the wrong word.” He then read from the dictionary, “peculiar – characteristic of only one person, distinctive, different from the usual, special.”

He smiled, as I did. I had been reminded of a very important lesson and I had learned a very important fact about my father. Other than the Bible, the most important book on my desk is the dictionary, which I consult to make certain that words which I commonly use are being used accurately and precisely. I had always used “peculiar” in its secondary sense as “odd or eccentric,” rather than its primary sense which, though it may have fallen into disuse, is nonetheless the precise meaning of the word. I thanked the kind lawyer for the lesson.

It has been almost seven years since that conversation took place with the lawyer and it has been over four years since by father’s death but I regularly think about the language lesson and almost as often of Cotesworth’s question. As I think of my father as a “peculiar man” -- “a special, one-of-a-kind, different-from-the-usual” kind of man -- I think, “What was his peculiarity?” The answers have surprised even me because I realize that my father was a man of contentment, of character, of commitment, of constant activity, of compassion, of confrontation and of the love for children.

As I have thought about my father, I cannot name one single thing that I know he ever wanted. That may be the most profound and peculiar thing about him. I cannot think of anything he ever expressed an interest in having or wanting. He was not passive, complacent, or indifferent about life, but I don’t know a man who was ever more content. The only time I ever remember him expressing an inability to afford anything was the time mentioned above when I asked for something and he said, “We can’t afford that.” I later understood that it was not that we did not have the money but that it was not a wise idea to make the purchase. I learned there is a difference between having the money to buy something and making the choice to buy it.

I can never remember my father not having enough money. This was a man who worked for a salary all of his life and for many years earned what most would consider a meager wage. His lack of need of more money was not a function of the abundance of his money, but it was a function of my father's contentment, which was supported by my mother. He had everything a man could want: a family, a home and he had his work

Can you imagine how different the world would be if everyone lived within their means? Of course, our economy would not have expanded as monstrously as it has, driven as it is by consumption, but neither would the pain of our weaning ourselves from our addiction to over consumption be so great. Can you imagine the lessons in self-control and contentment which could have been learned by children and adults who told themselves, "I can't afford that;" or, in reality, "I don't really need that?" What differences would we have seen in several generations, who having learned self-control and thrift from their parents, had practiced both? How many fewer divorces would there have been? How much less child, or spousal abuse would there have been? How much less alcohol and drug addiction would there have been? Is it possible that it is true that "the love of the money (and the things it can buy) is the root of all evil."

The songs declare that this is "the most wonderful time of the year," and it can be. If we rediscover family, friends, faith and if we rediscover the fundamental values of all faiths but particularly of the Christian faith which are "alms" (giving of that which others need and which we have); "fasting" (the disciplining of ourselves so that we have the alms to give), and "prayer" (the realizations that we are not the center of the universe and there is One greater than us upon Whom we must depend and call).

This year I hope you have the joy of giving something to someone you do not know. I hope you have the joy of giving something of yourself, of your time, your energy, your love. I hope you and your family take greater delight in the embrace of a hug, a handshake, a heart-felt smile and of an expression of "I love you," than of "things" we wrap up in pretty paper.

Enjoy the season! Enjoy the merriment! But, don't forget that the reason for the season is love and true giving. Merry CHRISTmas and may your hopes and dreams for the New Year be about serving rather than being served, about giving yourself rather than getting and about finding a purpose for living which is worthy of your life. God bless us all!