

“ADVENT CONSPIRACY (#2): GIVE MORE”

(John 1:1-5, 14)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (1) Tin of Mrs. Springfield’s Raisin Cookies; (2) Picture/Frame from Jennifer;
(3) Insert: “*Give More: Gift Ideas for Relational Giving*”]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-5-10]

–I–

1. **[Traditional AND Contemp. Service:]** Read Text (9:20, MSG; 11am NRSV): John 1:1-5, 14 and Pray.

A–The place was 3649 Calmer Circle in East Point, GA, where I grew up as a young boy..

1–Living next door to us were James and Caretta Springfield, a retired couple whose name I couldn’t pronounce, so I just called them “*Mr. & Mrs. Pingpield.*”

2–Well, every Christmas Mrs. Pingpield would make the most delicious Raisin Cookies and give them to my sister and I as gifts – they were made with real butter, plump raisins, and were cut out with a coffee can, making them really, really big!

3–And although she passed on many years ago, the tradition of making and giving “*Ms. Pingpield’s Raisin Cookies*” has recently been taken up by my sister, who makes them for me each year as one of my Christmas gifts (and since we were together last week, guess what? Here they are! **[SHOW TIN OF COOKIES]**)

B–Now fast forward to Summer 1997, when my family and I took a beach vacation to Florida, where I did two of the things I love most on beach trips: I built a sand castle; and I spent time with my daughter and wife.

C–Imagine my surprise when that Christmas I received this... **[SHOW PICTURE FRAME]** – a picture of Jennifer and I in front of a sand castle we’d built, in a picture frame she’d made out of tongue depressors and seashells.

3. Now, these two gifts aren’t the only special Christmas gifts I’ve ever received over the years, but they’re among the most precious.

A–Why? Not because they cost a lot of money, or came from a specialty store, but because they celebrate the value of some my most cherished relationships.

B–And I’m sure you could all name similar gifts that you’ve received over the years, as well – gifts that weren’t necessarily bought at a store, but were valuable instead because they were made, cooked, written, sung, painted, or sculpted by someone special to you.

C–Well, today we continue our series “Advent Conspiracy” in which we’re unpacking four counter-cultural concepts that can help us recapture the true meaning of Christmas, and keep us from being a slave to the consumer/retail circus that’s all around.

1–Last week we were reminded that when we “SPEND LESS” on excess gifts, and pay closer attention to what we *do* buy, we’ll discover resources we didn’t know we had that can then be shared with people in need.

2–Today we come to a second concept that can help us escape from the stress of a consumer-driven Christmas: **GIVE MORE**.

–II–

4. Now, at first this may sound like a contradiction: “Spend Less,” but “GIVE MORE”? What’s that all about?

A–Well, let’s begin by acknowledging that there *is* something very beautiful about the giving of gifts – we all like to *get* them, and most of us enjoy *giving* them, as well.

B–The problem is that the consumerist culture we live in tends to correlate one’s *value* with the nature and character of retail spending on our behalf – the idea being that if we *really* love someone, then we’ll *buy* them that *certain* expensive gift being advertised!

1–Now, there’s nothing *inherently* wrong with this – we *can* show our love for others through and with the things we buy for them.

2–The problem comes when we begin to *substitute* the purchased *gift* for the *relationship* itself – when the giving of some “thing(s)” becomes more important than the giving of *ourselves*.

3–How many times have you and I bought and given gifts (maybe even expensive ones) to sort of make up for our own inattentiveness in a relationship? I’ve done it. And I daresay most of you have, as well.

C–So, when I say “Give More,” I’m not talking here about giving more retail gifts (or even necessarily the giving of more money).

5. Instead, I’m simply referring to the giving of *ourselves* in meaningful, relational ways. And after all, isn’t that exactly what today’s scripture says God did on that first Christmas?

A–Verse 14: (MSG) “*The Word became flesh & blood, and moved into the neighborhood...*”; (NRSV) “*The Word became flesh and lived among us...*” – the Greek literally says “*the Word became flesh and ‘pitched tent’ among us...*”

B–In other words, when God wanted to show to us the character and nature of His love, He *didn’t* send down material “things” – even “good” things like work, food, or good health.

C–No. He gave us *Himself* – His gift that first Christmas was Himself, disguised in the form of a small baby, born to a peasant couple (in theological circles we call this the “*Incarnation*”)

6. And so, if we really want the kind of Christmas that matches the nature and character of that *first* Christmas (where *Relational Giving* was its heart), then *our* gifts should primarily be *relational*, as well.

A—They should celebrate and reflect a relationship in some creative way:

- 1—They could be something as simple as cooking some raisin cookies, or making a homemade picture and frame, or preparing coupons for time you spend with your family (like one of our church members said she received from her son one year).
- 2—It could be something that you make that becomes the next heirloom in your family, or you could write a letter to your spouse or child or parent.
- 3—Whatever it is, it should help celebrate the special relationship you have with the recipient, and help make your love for them visible through *relational* giving.

B—It's not that store-bought goods *can't* do this (some *can*) – it's just that the most meaningful relational gifts tend *not* to come from stores, but from our own hands.

- 1—Now, many of you have given these kinds of gifts, so you know what I'm talking about, but just to stimulate our own thinking further, in your bulletin you'll find an insert that contains creative gift ideas for Relational Giving [**SHOW INSERT**], and you'll find others at the online forum www.rethinkingchristmas.com.
- 2—My prayer is that you'll use these just as starters to consider how you can transform *your* giving from a kind that mirrors the consumerism and consumption of the *world* to a kind that reflects the intimate, relational character of God.

–III–

7. In the end, you see, today's scripture illustrates a kind of giving that can truly make a difference not only in the lives others, but also in ourselves.

A—It tells us of a God who gave us the personal gift of His own Presence – a gift that was precious and costly.¹

B—And it challenges us to make our giving at least in some small way reflective of the power and beauty of *that* relational gift.

C—The words of the book *Advent Conspiracy* summarize it well, “*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. Our kids will learn what it means to give gifts that are personal and meaningful. Our neighbors and coworkers and friends will watch us celebrate Christmas differently, & they'll hear the good news loud and clear through the seasonal static.*”²

D–Today, God is inviting us to be part of an “*Advent Conspiracy*” where – in place of worldly *Presents* (“ts”)– we seek to “**GIVE MORE**” of our own *Presence* (“ce”), just as He did on that first Christmas so long ago.

8. [PRAY: “*O God, 2000 years ago you showed us the best way to give by sharing with us the relational gift of yourself in the form of the baby Jesus. He lived with us, worked among us, showed us how to love, showed us how to forgive, and showed us how to have a vital relationship with you. And now, each Christmas we seek to give each other gifts to show our love, as well. Help us to give the kind of gifts that were illustrated in the giving of your son... relational gifts that are personal and precious, and that help us to celebrate the value of each relationship in a special and unique way. As you did so long ago, help us this Christmas to give more of our time, our resources, and mostly importantly ourselves to and for others. In pray all of this in the name of the greatest gift of all, Jesus, Amen.*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. The authors of the book *Advent Conspiracy* (on which this series is based) actually suggest that the Incarnation of God reveals these same three dimensions of God’s gift to us that first Christmas: (#1) God’s gift took the form of His **PRESENCE**; (#2) As opposed to the often *impersonal* gifts we sometimes give and receive each Christmas, God’s gift of Jesus was deeply **PERSONAL**. As they point out, Isaiah 9:6 says “*A Savior has been born for you...*” (i.e., God’s gift of Jesus was a very intimate, personal gift for us). “*Relational giving means that we pay attention to the other person. We think about who they are what they care about*” (p. 74); (#3) Finally, God’s gift of Jesus was precious and **COSTLY**. “*The gift God gave us [on the first Christmas] cost Him everything. What does that mean for us as we now give to one another? In practical terms, it means we must accept that relational giving will cost us... [at least] our time and energy*” (pp. 75-76). It also means that “*Relational giving will also be risky, at times. What if they don’t like it? What if they don’t understand our intent? What if they don’t appreciate the time we put into expressing love for them? This, too, is a reflection of the Incarnation. Didn’t Jesus give himself knowing full well that some would reject or misunderstand him?*” (p. 76) [Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder, *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), pp.71-76].

2. McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy*, p. 78.