

The Gift of Presence

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“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.” 1 John 4:9

I love this time of year when we get to celebrate God’s amazing gift! Out of His deep love for us, God gave His one and only Son and as Christians we know that through this gift we no longer have to fear death! It’s an eternal, life-changing gift and it’s free to all who believe! Hallelujah!

Although I feel excited to celebrate this God-given sacrifice, I also find myself struggling with the outpouring of material giving at this time of year. When I reflect, I wonder if present giving outweighs presence giving. As Christians, if we believe long-term, eternal impact happens through presence, do our behaviors support our beliefs?

After spending time on Thanksgiving with my mother-in-law, whose verbal communication is greatly compromised as a result of dementia, I found myself reflecting on her presence in my life over the last 34 years. What I’ve come to realize is that the most important and impactful present that she has given me, and still gives me, is the gift of her presence. Although financially able, my in-laws did not lavish excessive amounts of gifts on their kids or grandkids. However, they have lavished and generously given the gift of love, listening, encouragement, faith and hospitality; presents that have had lasting impact. When I reflect, it is the giving without expectation that has had profound meaning in my life. It was the offers to take care of sick kids to allow me time away, the many delicious homemade meals that showed up at our door, the cards sent, the phone calls just checking in that were great, but greatest was them journeying with me through the challenges of daily life, listening and speaking words of encouragement, love and affirmation. When I think about it, I realize that I selfishly loved visiting with them because I always left feeling like I was the greatest wife, mom, daughter-in-law and overall person; **and that was food for my soul**. They saw in me a potential I did not even see in myself and gave me permission to accept, love and be the person God created me to be and not to wish to be anyone else.

Although I acknowledge that taking care of the poor is a Biblical mandate, I can’t help but wonder if we put more emphasis on material giving than emotional and spiritual giving. When we consider “adopting a family” for Christmas, what is our hoped outcome of that experience? Is it primarily to connect with a family that we see as poor and needy and lavish gifts on them making us feel good because we helped the poor? In our community there are many opportunities for families to receive gifts; angel tree, toys for tots, Christmas baskets, parent groups from schools, church youth groups and small groups, individual families and many more; all given out of a genuine spirit of generosity and desire to “give” something to someone at Christmas. Does all this exchanging of “things” encourage the growing misconception that our value and level of success is found in materialism?

Imagine for a moment what would happen if as a faith community we chose to give differently? What might the outcome be if we gave gifts of a warm home cooked meal and brought it to someone and shared the meal together, baked and shared homemade cookies, sent encouraging cards to a family throughout the year, engaged in conversation with someone and spent time listening to them share their story, adopted a family to journey through life with over the next year; praying, listening, encouraging and sharing with each other, together. Might possible outcomes be an increased feeling of love, belonging, confidence, hope and gospel telling? Would exchanging presents with presence have an eternal outcome?

Everyone, both rich and poor, has something to give. My challenge to you is to consider how you might give the gift of love through your presence this Christmas. If you need help with ideas, please contact VIS as we are aware of an overwhelming amount of lonely people who would be blessed by your presence.

Merry Christmas!