

"What To Give For Christmas?"

It was Christmas week. Eleven couples had gotten together to study, share, and pray. Ron and Ann had started these monthly gatherings to challenge their friends with the claims of Christ. These were informal meetings where each was encouraged to be open and honest.

Over the months, a number of persons in the group had grown spiritually, and some of the group members had struggled through varying degrees of hostility and indifference towards a radiant commitment of their lives to Jesus.

This evening the discussion had been good. Ron closed his Bible, stretched, smiled and said, "Now it's time to exchange Christmas gifts." There was an awkward pause. One lady said, "But Ron, nothing was said about bringing presents. We don't have any." Ron looked around intently at the others in the group, "How about giving each other gifts that can't be bought?"

There was more silence, as people darted glances at each other. Finally, one of the men spoke: "Well, this year my wife and I are giving each other a gift that we don't feel is selfish." He hesitated. His eyes met hers and she nodded encouragement. "We're spending the holiday weekend together in the mountains. We need to get away from the rush of things and from everyone else's problems. As individuals and as a couple we need to think, meditate, and to find God in a fresh way for the coming year."

There was another uncomfortable period of quietness. Then Anne spoke: "Bob and Lynn are new with us tonight. My gift to them - it is personal. I promise to pray for them every day between now and our meeting next month." Sensing Anne's love in giving this gift, Lynn bit her lip to keep back a tear.

Another person in the group - Tom - fidgeted a little, then said this: "Frankly, I'm stymied. I'd like to give something to someone but I'm honestly not ready. I want to *want* to give it, and perhaps by the first of the year I can."

Hal and Louise had been having marital problems and were trying a new start as a Christian couple. Louise spoke just above a whisper: "I'd like to make my gift to one person, my husband." Surprised, her husband Hal placed his hand over hers and held it there as Louise continued. "I give him a better wife this coming year. With God's help I know I can. If things don't work out it will be my own fault."

All the while, a group member named Janet sat rigid. It was hard for her to reach out to anyone, let alone her husband. Dominant, self-sufficient, she was struggling inside. Finally she blurted out: "I've just got to say something. This year I give my husband the gift of respect. Putting him down, that's what I'm always doing in front of our three children. I want him to know by my attitude that he is the head of our marriage and home." Dumfounded, her husband just looked at her in disbelief.

After a while, the group leader, Ron, who had started it all, spoke again: "Tonight we've seen that giving ourselves to one another is a fresh way of learning what life's all about; it brings a priceless response. And when these heartfelt gifts are *unexpected* they mean even more. It's what Christmas is all about - for God so loved that He gave His best, His Son." Then he waited a moment, and with a boyish grin said, "Now I'm ready. My present is for every one of you. Regardless of what I do or you do, I offer each one here my friendship, no strings attached. I'll be your friend always for the rest of our lives."

What are you going to give for Christmas? Things? Just things that can be bought? Now giving a material gift, a present that can be bought, *really is* one way of expressing love. It may well represent the giving of ourselves, *but not necessarily*. Buying and giving a present might just mean being able to check one more person off our Christmas list, or just giving something because it's expected, or saving the embarrassment of having someone buy you a gift and you not having anything for them in return. Sometimes buying and giving an expensive present can be an easy way out - it's a way of avoiding the more difficult task of building a meaningful relationship, or of healing a broken one.

The best gifts are not bought in stores or online, but are expressed heart to heart, when we give others more of *ourselves* - our time, our interest, our love. *What are you and I going to give for Christmas? Christmas can be so much more meaningful if we give more than just presents that can be bought!*

That's what the Christmas story is about in the Bible! God giving Himself to us. We have heard the Christmas story so many times, we can become immune to its incredible meaning! "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger..." (Luke 2:7). The writers of the New Testament, looking back on that Event, say that in the birth of Jesus, in some incomprehensible, mysterious way, *God Himself* set foot on this planet, in order to save us!

God had tried many other ways to help us, guide us, save us! He gave us the gift of prophets and leaders like Moses and Joshua, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Micah. But we humans continued in our sin and rebellion against God. So God did something mind-boggling: He set foot on this planet Himself in the Person of Jesus. Jesus was God - "Emmanuel" - God with us! It was *God Himself* lying in the manger. And when Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine, it was *God* getting His feet dusty! When Jesus said something, it was *God Himself* talking! When Jesus was mocked and tortured, then hung on a cross, it was *God* feeling the anguish of the whip across His back, the thorns being pushed into His head, the nails pounded through His wrists!

Now Jesus didn't go around saying, "I'm God! I'm God!" But He was. The gospel writer John relates several instances, however, where Jesus made it clear who He really was! In John 10:30 John records these words of Jesus: "The Father and I are one." I The Father and I are one! In the next verse it says, "The Jews took up stones again to

stone him” (John 10:31). The Jews wanted to stone Jesus to death! They understood what He was saying! It was blasphemy to equate Himself with God!

Notice, it says they “took up stones *again*”. Earlier, they wanted to stone Him. We see this in John 8:58-59: “Jesus said to them ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am. So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.’ Jesus said ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ and ‘I am’ was a title for *God*! Again, the Jews recognized that Jesus was claiming equality with God. Now they want to stone Him *again*. “Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God’” (John 10:32-33).

The baby Jesus was *God, giving us Himself* at Christmas, so we can be forgiven of our sins, and begin a new life in Christ, with God at the center! Dr. Paul Tournier, the noted Swiss psychiatrist, said, "The great gift, the unique and living one, is not a thing but a person. It is Jesus Christ himself. In him God has given no longer just things...but his own person...this gift of all gifts is the self-commitment of God himself."

Will you give the gift of yourself this Christmas? Will you give your *self* to God? It is possible for us to give God *things* on the margins of our life - time in church work and worship services, token offerings of money, maybe occasionally time in prayer. But we never really have given what God wants most: that is *ourselves* – our hopes, our dreams, our plans, our will, and all we possess. *This Christmas, will you give yourself to Christ – for the first time, or in a new way?*

This Christmas will you give the gift of yourself to others? Not just presents that can be bought, but things you can't buy in a store: your respect, your listening ear, your time, your trust, your friendship, your understanding, your forgiveness.

That's what God was doing that first Christmas!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
December 3, 2017*

