

Advent is a Time to Value Relationships

Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

On Thursday evening Dru and I watched another version of Scrooge. You know Scrooge was a Humbug kind of person.

Our goal this Advent Season is to go from Humbug to Hallelujah!

For some reason many people find themselves struggling with humbug feelings during the holiday season.

There seem to be added stresses, pressures, hurts and frustrations.

Holidays seem to magnify everyone for better and more often for worse.

Psychologists tell us that Christmas is a time of intensified depression, conflict, and loneliness.

“Jingle Bells” drowns out the cry of the Christ child in the manger.

The message of God’s son is lost to parents whose children have grown and moved on, leaving the parents far behind.

The story of Joseph’s support of Mary doesn’t make sense to the women and men whose spouses have gone – whether by death or by desertion.

Like a biting winter wind, this “**most wonderful time of the year**” is anything but wonderful.

People who have a humbug feeling need to change to a hallelujah feeling.

Have you said “Hallelujah” lately? I don’t mean the kind of hallelujah I mentioned last Sunday about the horse story.

Years ago, late one Christmas Day, a resident of a very upscale community of Hillsborough, CA, accompanied by his wife and kids, set out to sing carols for their neighbors.

As they were tuning up outside their first stop the lady of the house came to the door, looking distraught.

“Look fella,” she said, “I’m too busy. The plumbing is on the blink, I can’t get anybody to fix it, and there’s a mob coming for dinner. If you really feel like singing carols, sing them someplace else.”

“Yes, Ma’am, replied Bing Crosby respectfully, as he herded his children to another house elsewhere.”

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In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy says to Snoopy: "There are times when you really bug me, but I must admit there are also times when I feel like giving you a hug."

Snoopy replies: "That's the way I am – huggable and buggable."

This is the situation many find themselves in when spending time with relatives at Christmas.

These kinds of personal relationships at Christmas are good reminders that relationships are more important than accomplishments.

It was Rick and Judy Armstrong who like many others had a hectic holiday schedule dealing with careers, teenagers, shopping, and all the required doings of the season.

Realizing that she would be short of time, she had the stationer print their signature on their Christmas cards, instead of signing each one.

Soon they started getting cards from friends signed "The Modest Morrisons," "The Clever Clarks," and "The Successful Smiths."

Then she discovered the stationer's subtle mistake.

She had mailed out a hundred cards neatly imprinted with "Happy Holidays from the Rich Armstrongs."

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I'm sure they laughed their way through that mistake.

But sometimes, during this time of the year, when things do go wrong, it is easy to throw up our hands and say, "What's the use?"

It just seems to be too much.

Matthew 1:18-25 gives us the birth of Jesus as viewed by Joseph.

There were special qualities demonstrated by Joseph and Mary that qualified them to be chosen by God to be parents of the Messiah.

Joseph valued his relationships with both God and his family.

The same qualities we see in the life of Joseph are the qualities each of us also need to possess.

1. Joseph was selfless in his relationships.

Verse 19. ***"Joseph was determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced."***

Joseph with his character quality of selflessness would be the kind of person you would enjoy being around.

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Joseph is the kind of person you would enjoy knowing as a friend.

Christmas is a time to value friendships.

The joyful atmosphere of Christmas is a great time to reach out and touch friends and relatives.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Philemon a friend to tell him how much he valued his friendship. **Philemon 4-7 New Living Bible**

“I always thank God when I pray for you ... because I keep hearing of your trust in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God’s people. You are generous because of your faith... I myself have gained much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because your kindness has so often refreshed the hearts of God’s people.”

Philemon was highly valued by Paul.

Paul commended him for his trust, love, generosity, and kindness.

Philemon was a refreshing person to be around, and Paul told him so.

Are you a refreshing person to be around?

If you are a selfless person people enjoy being around you.

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If you are a constant complainer and a very draining person you don’t refresh people you deplete people emotionally.

In Window, Ladders and bridges, Dr. A. Dudley Dennison, Jr. writes:

“I believe in God’s master plan for the interaction of lives. He moves people in and out of each other’s lives, and each leaves his mark on the other. You find you are made up of bits and pieces of everyone who ever touched your life---you are more because of it, and you would be less if they had not touched you.”

Christmas is a natural time to think of past and present relationships.

Is there someone in your life with whom you could touch base through a personal contact, letter, phone call, or email?

Perhaps you could contact a family member, long lost friend, or someone from another country.

True friendship is something that money can’t buy.

Great gifts can only go so far in developing relationships of value.

Great gifts may bring a moment of happiness but the feeling is only temporary and will not last.

The Robb Report suggests an **“Ultimate Gift Guide”** or the **Neiman-Marcus catalog** tells you **how to get in on some “ultimate gifts.”**

Ultimate gifts include: a weekend at the Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel Hotel on the Southern California coast.

You can split the cost with two other couples – the cost a mere \$500,000.

You would arrive on Friday via limousine, and each couple would get their own Mercedes-Benz car.

A caviar reception and gourmet dinner would follow.

On Saturday, you’ll have a massage and treatment in one of the world’s finest spas, then the option to play golf or tennis or drive your new roadster.

In the evening you will enjoy a dinner cruise.

If money would buy happiness surely Scrooge in the Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens would be a happy man.

In his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge gets a lesson in spiritual economics.

He sees clearly that gold and silver are not the true index of values. People are.

Scrooge sees the impoverished Cratchit family (their name is a reminder that they were just barely scratching out an existence in life) but the fact is they are enjoying one another and having a great holiday, in spite of their lack of material wealth.

They have riches that have nothing to do with finances.

As Scrooge witnesses this family’s interaction, he genuinely softens.

Beginning to thaw from his “humbug chill,” Scrooge anxiously inquires about the prospects for Tiny Tim.

The ghost reminds Scrooge of an incident that had happened earlier that Christmas eve.

Scrooge is asked by another wealthy gentleman for a Christmas donation for charity.

Scrooge responded with bitter sarcasm: “Are the poor houses still in operation? The orphanages?”

Receiving an affirmative reply, Scrooge expressed relief, for he was convinced that such institutions were the primary aid for the poor.

The volunteer solicitor replied: “But many would rather die than go to those places.” “Then let them

die,” said Scrooge, “and decrease the excess population.”

What kind of person would make such a statement: “Let them die, and decrease the excess population!”

How could anyone be so cold-hearted.

Like Scrooge many people need to learn the riches of love surpass the accumulation of money.

From the example of the Cratchits we learn that true riches are found in relationships.

2. Joseph demonstrated sacrificial love.

Joseph not only demonstrated selflessness he also demonstrated sacrificial love.

The value of relationships is at the heart of the story of the very first Christmas.

Joseph chose love for the Lord over the convenient choice of a quiet divorce.

You have to admire the sacrificial love of Joseph, his courage and his commitment.

He was willing to endure the embarrassment and the questions and accusations.

Joseph’s love did not waver even when taken away from his homeland of Nazareth for the census.

Joseph was taken away from his occupation, no insurance, no vacation leave, no unemployment compensation!

We know Joseph and Mary lived below the poverty level, since they could only afford doves, the least expensive purification rites. (Luke 2:22)

Shortly after the birth of Jesus Joseph and Mary and newborn Jesus became refugees to Egypt fleeing from the wrath of Herod.

The first family understood the value of true riches, family relationships of love and doing what is best for all members of the family.

The Proverbs writer understood and contrasted the lasting treasure of love with fleeting riches of this world.

Proverbs 17:1 **“Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.”**

Proverbs 15:16 **“Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil.”**

Proverbs 16:8 **“Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.”**

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Proverbs 11:24 **“some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.”**

We get riches as we invest in lives.

We store up treasures that last by giving ourselves to others.

True riches are not found in the stingy accumulation of wealth, but in the extravagant investment of love.

The Apostle Paul to practice love in our daily relationships we have with others. **“Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged.”** (I Corinthians 13:4-5)

I like the story of an event that took place a number of years ago. A man named Paul received a new car from his brother as a Christmas present.

On Christmas Eve, when Paul came out of his office, a young boy in ragged clothes was walking around the shiny new car admiring and touching it.

The little boy looked up and asked, “Is this your car, mister?” “Yes,” Paul replied, “My brother gave it to me for Christmas.”

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The little boy said, “You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn’t cost you nothin?” Paul nodded. The little boy said, “Boy, I wish....”

And Paul thought he knew what the little boy was wishing – that he had a brother like that, too. But he surprised Paul.

“I wish,” the boy went on, “I could be a brother like that.”

Paul looked at the boy in amazement. Then he asked, “Would you like to have a ride in my new car?”

The boy exclaimed, “Oh yes, I’d love that.” After a short ride, the little boy turned to Paul and asked, “Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?”

Paul smiled, because he thought he knew why the little boy wanted to drive in front of his house.

He wanted to show his neighbors he could come home in this big, beautiful car.

“Will you stop where those two steps are?” asked the little boy as they drove up to his house.

He ran up the steps and into the house.

In a little while, Paul saw him coming back.

He was carrying his little brother, who was crippled with polio.

He sat him down on the bottom step and scooted up against him.

He pointed to the car. "There she is Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. Ain't she beautiful? His brother gave it to him for Christmas and it didn't cost him notin'. You know what, Buddy? Someday I'm going to give you one just like it! Then you can see all the Christmas things in the windows I've been telling you about."

Paul got out and walked over to the boys. "Do you want to ride around and see those things right now?"

They both nodded eagerly with bright faces.

Paul leaned over and lifted the lad up to the front seat of the car.

His shining-eye older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride.

This story is a great example of what true treasure is.

True riches are not found in the stingy accumulation of wealth, but in the extravagant investment of love.

This Christmas make the commitment to value and care for those God brings into your life.

Look at where you are making investments.

Are there relationships you are neglecting?

What about your children?

Are you taking time to make adequate investments in their lives.

A. Milne, author of Winnie the Pooh books, ready did have a son named Christopher Robin.

But, unlike the boy in the classic children's stories, the real Christopher wasn't so carefree.

Life at home was stressful.

His famous father knew how to connect with other children's imaginations but miserably failed to connect with his son.

Christopher Robin Milne grew up to detest his father.

The reason was easy to trace – his father had time to write stories for other children but never had time for his own.

As parents we need to ask Jesus to so fill our hearts with His love that we overflow to our children.

Christmas is about people.

You can become a partner with God in blessing people.

This Christmas plan to do something for someone that can do nothing in return to you.

3. Joseph was obedient to God's will.

Joseph was selfless in his relationships.

Joseph demonstrated sacrificial love and Joseph was obedient to God's will.

Joseph did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream.

He married Mary and he did not have sexual relations with her until after Jesus was born.

Joseph could pray from his heart part of the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane ***"not my will but your will be done."***

When you are open and obedient to God's Will in your life it is much easier for you to embrace the character qualities of selflessness and sacrificial love.

You can say to the Lord, ***"Take my life and let it be, fully consecrated Lord to Thee."***

As you daily walk with the Lord the Lord will guide you and in His divine Providence He will use you to have a positive influence on your family and others you associate with.

This Advent put a special value on relationships.

In the original Home Alone movie, elementary age Kevin McAllister is accidentally left behind when his family flies to France for Christmas.

At first, Kevin is delighted.

Realizing he has the run of the house, he jumps on the beds and rides a toboggan down the staircase.

But soon his attempts to entertain himself lose their attractiveness as Kevin comes to the conclusion that without people to share in the celebration, Christmas is empty and sad.

Because of his loneliness, Kevin crosses the border of fear and reaches out to Old Man Marley, a reclusive neighbor Kevin's fiends have labeled as monster.

They encounter each other and renew an appreciation for togetherness.

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I recently read about a modern day Scrooge. George Mason's life centered on his business.

He lived alone, and on this Christmas he had refused all invitations.

Late afternoon Christmas Eve, he went into the office vault.

Soundlessly on newly oiled hinges, the great door swung shut behind him.

Desperately he pounded on the door, but realized no one would hear him.

Everyone was gone, even the cleaning woman.

Surely he could make it overnight, he consoled himself.

Then he remembered that the next day was not a working day, it was Christmas!

Feeling around in darkness, he was relieved to locate the safety air hose at the bottom of the wall, where a trickle of air was coming in.

Christmas Eve and then Christmas Day passed.

He was alone – as he had planned.

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But he was uncomfortable, hungry, and thirsty, in darkness so dense he could almost feel it brushing his face.

He tried to sleep...anything to pass the time.

He thought of friends and family and how they must be enjoying Christmas.

He wondered if they missed him.

The day after Christmas, someone arrived early and unlocked the vault.

Unnoticed, George Mason staggered out and over to the water cooler.

Then he took a taxi to his lonely apartment to freshen up.

Back at the office, no one suspected a thing.

Physically, he had missed Christmas.

But friends and family hadn't given him a thought, so in a way, he hadn't missed anything.

After that lonely experience, he wrote on a little card: **“To love people, to be indispensable, somewhere: that is the purpose of life. That is the secret of happiness.”**

He then taped it to a wall high up in the vault to always remind himself of what had been missed.”

This Christmas season commit to practicing the character qualities of selflessness, sacrificial love and doing God’s will.