

THE MEANING OF GIFTS

From your expressions, you didn't expect to see me here. Didn't know I was religious? Ho! Ho! Ho! How surprising! I don't expect my secular friends to understand such things, but you of all people should know that all real generosity comes from God. Besides, in real life I was a bishop, didn't you know? Bishop of Myra. That's a beautiful town on the southern coast of what you call Turkey. Gorgeous place. Myra's got the North Pole beat all to pieces, let me tell you! The Church of Saint Nicholas is still there, and lots of people come to celebrate my feast day every December 6th. Actually, that's when we used to give presents to the children, back before anybody had decided for sure when to celebrate Christmas. I was buried there, at the church in Myra, back in the fourth century A.D., and my sarcophagus is still there. But pirates stole the remains in 1087 and carried them to Bari, in Italy. That's the trouble with having precious bones – nobody gives you any rest. But it was probably a lucky thing, because it ended up making me famous all over Europe. And now, a thousand years after that theft, even *you* have heard of me.

Maybe I should tell you about my costume, since most people have forgotten. Red and white are the true colors of Christmas. Green is a much later addition, but pretty nice, all the same. Anyway, red stands for the blood of Christ, of course. And the white is because it washes our sins white as snow. Oh yes, I used to be very closely associated with the real Christmas. And that symbolism is everywhere you look this time of year. Take a candy cane, for instance. Red and white (there it is again), in the form of a shepherd's crook – to remind us of the true Shepherd, who lays down His life for His sheep. That is the most classic candy symbol in all of Christmas.

So much red might bother you if you don't remember what it means, but to us, blood symbolized LIFE. And *His* blood was the most precious thing on earth. You see, we never celebrated just the birth of a baby; we celebrated the Incarnation – the birth of the Messiah. And we never forgot all that He went through for us – and, sadly, *because* of us. So Christmas was mixed with tears and repentance too, even though we couldn't keep from ending up joyful, seeing what wondrous New Life Jesus had opened up for us. So we wished each other a “merry” Christmas – which used to mean “dauntless,” “courageous,” “bold-hearted” – like, “Don't let anything

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steal away your love for Him!” Yes, cheerful too. But today, a lot of cheer seems empty, like people don’t know the real reason for it. They wonder why they feel sad or lonely at Christmas. It’s just their souls trying to reconnect with the real meanings that are now lost or ignored for so many. All they can come up with is “Happy Holidays.” And that is really offensive. None of us – least of all Jesus – were putting our lives on the line for “Happy Holidays.”

Well, I didn’t come here just to talk about myself, but I did come here because I have some things I wanted to say. In case you’re wondering, Bruce did invite me to preach today. He knows me better than some of you think, and we are pretty good friends most of the time – even if he does have a sharp tongue sometimes. That crack about “the fat man in the Satan suit” was uncalled for, I thought. Kind of hurt my feelings. I’m not all that fat. But I’m magnanimous at heart, and I know it’s just because he gets annoyed at all the junk that obscures the true meaning of Christmas. The truth is, I get sicker of the corruption and misuse of all I try to stand for even more than he does. Only, I don’t have time to stop and fight it. I just go on working at being generous, and I keep hoping that more and more people will catch on.

Actually, this church is more generous than most people know. That’s why I was willing to come talk to you this morning. I watch for that kind of thing, you know. Obviously, you give heavily to many worthy causes – some through your denomination, and some in the several ways you try to help the community. Many of you surround each other with support and love and encouragement that are beyond price. But there is also *secret help* flowing out of this church to help individuals. That’s right – more than most folk will ever know. The faith and encouragement you send along with it do more good than the money, but I like it when generosity is deep and quiet and genuine like that. So don’t tell anybody I mentioned it. You’ll ruin it if you start bragging about it or advertising it.

Speaking of ruination, I don’t think you have to worry about Christmas being ruined any more today than in any other day. Christmas has always been ruined by some. Right from the beginning, there have been those who don’t get the real meaning or purpose. It has always been that way in this world. Where do you think you are? (Ho! Ho! Ho! I didn’t get that from Bruce – he got that from me!) What is really phenomenal is that some people *do* catch on. The miracle is that people are good and generous and loving way down underneath all the fear and

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pain and guilt – just like you would expect if God really made us. Sometimes it takes a lot to bring it out. Once out, it takes a lot to keep it out. Sometimes I can help a little to bring it out. But it takes someONE a lot greater than me to keep it out there, on the line, all year long – where it can do real good.

So Christmas is always ruined by some, and always kept alive by others. That's just the way it is. Only, what ruins it most is not what most people think. Stop worrying about the Scrooge of the storybooks – a couple of misers here and there are no threat to Christmas. If they think gold can make them happy, leave them alone for a few more years; time will wake up some of them. Even if they never catch on, the value will be recirculated when they die. (God is not as dumb as some people think.) Anyway, misers are not the real problem. The real Scrooges are the ones who *cheapen* Christmas. Oh, they go along with it – sometimes they sing the loudest, put up the most lights, give the most parties, or at least go to a lot of them. But it's all for show. None of the gifts are genuine; none of them come from costly love. They give nothing of themselves. And what they *do* give is given to get something back. I don't mean you should do something about it; you cannot change these people. The only thing you can do is make sure you are not like them. But they are the *real* Scrooges – the scourge of Christmas – those who cheapen it. They seem to have no notion where Christmas comes from or who its true Lord is.

Now I want to talk about gifts for a minute. Gifts are my thing. I don't know who started the rumor that I am shallow or thoughtless or that all I give are “things.” I try to give a whole lot beyond just the “things.” But “things” are great because they are concrete. You can see them and touch them. That makes them particularly useful with children. What happens if you love children but never touch them or hug them? They cannot *hear* you. They do not *feel* loved. Likewise, if they cannot touch something you give them, it is hard for them to remember that you really love them. By the way, if they can touch too many things, that confuses them too. Too many presents obscure the message as much as no presents. Some of you put too much stuff in the stockings and too much stuff under the tree. That obscures the party – takes away from just being together. Christmas is about somebody who loves us – God, in Christ Jesus. So underneath all the things we do, the only way to celebrate Christmas is to love each other. At least that's what I believe. And that's what I get from that Bible passage we just read. You didn't

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know I read The Good Book? All the time! It is necessary for those of us who want to be Christians to read some portion of the Scriptures every day. Didn't you know that?

Anyway, in their proper place, "things" are great. You go to bed at night and wake up the next morning ... and there it is. If you aren't really dense, then every time you see it, stumble over it, get it out, or put it away, it reminds you: Somebody cares about you. That "thing" is the evidence. "Things" are great. But that's only the beginning of it. A gift means "I care!" A gift means "I love you." Probably if I care, I would like it a lot if you cared back – but a true gift is not related to what comes back. That brings us back to the real Scrooge. A Scrooge gives gifts that are not real gifts: bribes, deals, investments, seed-money, con games. That's what some people keep doing to my Christmas. The storybook Scrooge who won't give anything to anybody is not hurting anybody but himself. The true Scrooge gives plenty, maybe even lavishly, but it is not a true gift. It has hooks in it – it obligates, and controls. That is the Scrooge who steals Christmas. (Anything that weakens our bonds with the true Lord of Christmas is the enemy of Christmas.) That is what is wrong with "Happy Holidays" – and everything else that cheapens and weakens the real Message.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a good deal, with an honest trade-off – meaning, when all parties understand and agree to the terms. That's what makes the world go 'round. Value for value is wonderful stuff, and it need never hang its head in anybody's company. Great relationships are often built on it.

But that is not what I'm about, actually. Too much of Christmas, in my opinion, has turned into trading presents. That's not bad; it's wonderful. But it hasn't reached the level of the magic – it doesn't yet celebrate the true Lord of Christmas. Everybody knows some people who are not in the loop, so to speak. Some of them are too poor; some of them are too lonely; some are too shy, or too hurt, or too angry, or too cynical. It isn't really Christmas until some of them are getting picked up too. That's what we learn from the Christ who is the real Lord of Christmas. Hey – He is my Lord too, you know! I didn't invent any of this stuff. I just stumbled into it trying to follow Him.

And the big secret, the real magic, is when we give something truly generous, thoughtful, and loving – and nobody knows where it came from. That's the real magic of Christmas. That's what made me famous. That's

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what the people who know me best think I stand for. So I keep hoping more and more people will remember and catch on. Every Christmas, at least one of your biggest gifts should be like that – outlandish, but if you can help it, nobody knows where it came from. Jesus said: *“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:1-4)

Isn't that beautiful! It always brings tears to my eyes. What amazing wisdom and love our Lord has. So that's the real core and magic of my kind of Christmas. That's the principle that lights my life. You think I only care about the toy car or the doll or the train? Let me tell you something: I didn't become this legend out of nowhere. Life doesn't happen that way. You know very well that I exist most profoundly as the image and spirit of generosity – true generosity – true gift-giving. Because I have been of the essence of giving, it is inevitable, I suppose, that I should be associated (linked, if you will), unworthy though I am, with the greatest giver there is – I mean ever! Through all time! Jesus the Christ. Like my favorite passage says: *“Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* That is always at the heart of Christmas. That is always the standard and the goal. You don't always have to die to do that, you know. The “things” are the first level. Behind that is true caring. And deeper than *that* is love. The “things” are only symbols. When we truly give, we give our selves. When we truly love, we give our selves. You don't always have to die to do that – though we have to die *to self* a little to do that. The Lord of Christmas died because the world tried to get between Him and His love for us – tried to stop His radical love for us. The world said, “You stop this. You quit or we will kill you.” And you know what happened. Fat chance the world had of stopping *His* kind of love!

It makes everything I do to encourage and support Christmas look very meager by comparison. But that doesn't matter. We all do what we can ... what is possible ... what is given us to do. It is not about competition; it's about following Him, and learning to live by the truth He revealed. Living or dying – when we truly give, we give our selves. The “things” are only symbols.

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I was saying that I didn't become this legend out of nowhere. Maybe I can mix my story with my message just a little. For the kind of giving that true Christmas runs on, you have to have compassion. Nobody gets born with compassion. Like everything else, it comes from somewhere – from experience mixed with insight and awakening. Three simple things:

1.) TO ACQUIRE COMPASSION, FIRST WE HAVE TO SUFFER.

Everybody suffers, of course. Maybe you never thought about old Saint Nicholas suffering. Myra was a beautiful town, but the world was not an easy place for Christians in my day. A few of you may even have heard of the Reign of the Emperor Diocletian. It came to be called “The Era of the Martyrs.” It was the last and the worst of the great persecutions of Christians under the old Roman Empire. Our Faith was spreading fast across the Empire, and that threatened a lot of people. We were everywhere, and we were being blamed for everything that went wrong. A great movement arose to return to the old gods and to the old ways, and that meant destroying us. First they burned our churches and our books. Then they started arresting the clergy, torturing and killing many of us. You know: get the leaders, and the movement will die. They had no idea what we were really like. Our real Leader was the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus. Going after the clergy had no impact, so a year later they were arresting the laypeople too. Many of us were killed, more than in any previous persecution. I was imprisoned, along with many of the other bishops and church leaders of the time. It seemed pretty clear that my life was near its end. We were beaten, starved, tortured. It didn't matter what we said or if we had done anything wrong. There was no court of appeals. I wasn't so much praying for release as praying that it would soon be over.

Then Constantine, the blessed Emperor Constantine, began to fight his way from West to East across the Empire. And wonder of wonders, he won and kept on winning until all the Empire was under his control. He fought, by the way, under the Cross of Christ – that Cross was emblazoned on his banners. And in each section of the Empire that came under his rule, the edicts flew – releasing all Christians and protecting us from persecution. So one day, to my amazement, I was free – born again out of that dark prison into a new life. Not that I wasn't already born again by the love of Christ, but now life was more precious, somehow, than it had ever been before. Suffering sometimes does that for us – makes us see everything differently. But by itself, that is not enough.

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- 2.) NEXT WE HAVE TO TRANSFER OUR EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING, UNTIL WE IDENTIFY WITH OTHER PEOPLE WHO ARE SUFFERING – until we experience their suffering as something personal.

This doesn't always happen, even to people who have suffered a lot. I don't know why it happened to me. I only know that everything was different for me. It was like I was now living on borrowed time – like I was slated to die but, by some mistake or accident, I was still alive. That meant it really didn't matter what happened to me anymore, and so I was suddenly free from layers of past fear that I had not even realized I was carrying. The strange thing was, I felt an enormous new awareness of what other people were going through. It was like I was no longer in front of my own face – in the way I had been before those days in prison – and so I could see others more clearly. It felt like I could see them, maybe, more nearly the way Jesus sees each of us.

- 3.) THE THIRD THING IS, WE HAVE TO DECIDE IF WE WILL DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.

If we decide to do something about it, this means that we must weaken or jeopardize our own position in some way. That is, in some way it will cost us. Some of the world, even the Christian world, is not going to agree with who we try to help or how we try to help them. That's just part of the way it is ... *always*.

In my case, it got started because I noticed these three young women in my parish who came from extremely poor families. They were good, conscientious young women. I remember sitting one night and pondering the life that seemed to lie ahead for each of them. Suddenly I realized that they were each in a kind of prison just as much as I had been, only it had no walls. And they had no hope of ever getting out of theirs. Their families were too poor to ever provide them with a dowry. In our culture at that time, this meant there was no chance of their ever being married, having a home, raising children, living a decent, normal, productive life. Very probably they would end up prostitutes just trying to survive.

The next day I had a secret conversation with each of their fathers. I told them that as soon as they could arrange a proper marriage, *I would provide the dowry*. No one was to know where it came from, primarily because I didn't want any trouble with the Archbishop. That's

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how I stumbled onto Jesus' principle. Not from brilliance, but from fear of the consequences. Of course, in time it did leak out – and of course, I did have trouble with the Archbishop. But he couldn't stop me. I had lost too much fear in that prison, while he had been off in hiding. Meanwhile, I began to find more and more ways to help more and more people. Before long, generous supporters were helping me with even more gifts of compassion. Always I tried to keep it as quiet as possible. But pretty soon I was getting blamed for every kindness and every miracle that happened to anybody in the whole territory, whether I had anything to do with it or not. Within two hundred years, the Emperor Justinian had built a beautiful church in Constantinople in honor of my ministry of generosity.

By the Middle Ages, my reputation had spread. I was the patron saint of both Russia and Greece; I was patron saint of charitable fraternities and guilds everywhere; I was patron saint of children, sailors, unmarried women, merchants, and pawnbrokers. There were literally thousands of churches all over Europe dedicated to me – or, as I prefer to think, to the generosity of compassion for which I stood. Did you know that the movement to bring down the Berlin Wall formed out of one of the churches named in my honor? I cannot tell you all my stories, but there is a piece of trivia most people don't know: I am the father of lighthouses. People got to building churches in my name in prominent places along the shore so they would be a landmark for seafarers. One thing led to another, and pretty soon I was the father of lighthouses!

My reputation took a sudden nosedive during the Protestant Reformation. Hey, I don't resent Protestants; Luther, like myself and like all my best friends in our Faith – like Paul or Origen or Jonathan Edwards, or even Jesus Himself – broke past the structures of the religion of his time in order to serve better – to be more faithful to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Church is for comfort, strengthening, and learning. Church is for friendship, support, and community. Wonderful! But never let it get bigger or more important than your personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. That relationship will cause you real trouble, by the way – just like it has me and all my truest Christian friends down through all the generations. But that is also where the real meaning and excitement of our Faith comes from.

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Anyway, by the time of the Reformation, I was too much associated with the Catholic church, however unfair that was. Your Puritan forebears wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Christmas and strictly forbade its celebration in any way. Not surprisingly, Protestant countries all over Europe dropped me cold – all except for Holland. There they called me Sinterklaas – their variant of Saint Nicholas – and in the seventeenth century they carried my legend to New Amsterdam, which most of you call “New York.” Slowly I became popular again, finally catching on big in the nineteenth century. So now, even the children of the Puritans are on speaking terms with me again. The only unfortunate thing was, some people started mixing me up with an old Nordic folktale about a magician who punished naughty children and rewarded good children with presents. Lots of parents thought that was a great addition, and that it would help them to keep their children in line. But you cannot fake things like that. If you are a parent, you need to step up to the plate, teach your kids real values, and insist on appropriate behavior – and don’t blame it on me. Besides, such notions are an offense to the grace of the Gospel I live by, and to the grace of the Lord I have always tried to serve. I give presents to bad people and naughty children all the time – a thing to which most of you could surely testify, if you only would.

Well, it has been nice chatting with you, but Christmas Eve is fast approaching and I have much to do. I’d love to stay and talk with each of you personally, but really I must be on my way. If you have any special requests, tell my assistants here, and they’ll get word to me. Those of you who have true compassion, I always need all the help I can get; I count on all of you who are willing – as I always have, ever since this thing got started back in Myra in the fourth century. And thanks for all you do to help the true celebration.

Oh, one last thing: I would like to remind you that I am not the heart and core of Christmas. I am only a symbol of one of the ways to celebrate it. Neither have I ever died for your sin, nor risen from the dead. I merely wish to serve the Christ who did. And I hope that is what you want to do too. So let us never forget the true Lord of Christmas.

Merry Christmas, everybody!