

Celebrate the Joy of Giving

So we have piled Joy upon Joy for this Sunday! It is the Advent Sunday of Joy. Joy is our core value this month. And some of you know that I believe Joy is the 13th spiritual power. So what do we make of joy?

As a core value we say: ***Living from our oneness with Spirit, we give radiant expression to a lightness of being.*** Radiant expression, like a candle in the darkness of this winter season, shines out from us! We lighten up in the midst of what can be a busy, stressful time of doing, and fretting about doing, and fretting about doing it right! Webster offers a material world definition of joy that says, “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires : delight.” Webster’s definition seems highly weighted by what is going on outside us—success and good fortune. Yet, if we move within in our thoughts with the knowing we **do** already possess what we desire *through our very nature as spiritual beings* and our connection with Spirit, we can bring joy back into perspective as something welling up from inside us, not dependent on external circumstances. Charles Fillmore says joy is “The happiness of God expressed through His perfect idea—[hu]man. Joy and gladness are strength-giving, especially if the mind is fixed on the things of Spirit.” We focus on Spirit and the happiness of Spirit expresses through us. Hmm... How do we tap into this joy of spirit? We are spiritual beings also having a human experience and sometimes we are sad; we experience depression and things get out of balance in our bodies. How do we connect with joy within us? The one thing most of the winter celebrations have in common is the giving and exchanging of gifts. I would propose that giving is one way to connect with the joy already within us. And as I reflected on this idea of the joy of giving, I discovered two factors that seem to influence my experience of giving. First, is the gift well received if it is not given anonymously? Second, do I believe I have gifts worthy of giving? Let’s explore those two concepts this morning.

How do you give a gift that is well received? If you are like me, you have a variety of receiver styles in your circle of family and friends. My Mom gives me a list. Occasionally I have been inspired to go off the list because I think she might like it. I have learned my lesson. Off the list gifts are greeted with “I didn’t ask for that! Why on earth would you give me that?” My Son gives me a list—subject to periodic updates right up til the day of Christmas. It usually has a LOT to choose from, some of it fairly unlikely—tickets to see the Patriots play for instance. However, he hardly ever is unhappy with what he gets.

Most of it is from his list but it is far from **everything** on the list! We (Kari and I) exchange gifts with my bestie in California. We never ask for anything. Being in ministry, we never get stuff there on or before Christmas or our birthdays. And we are always surprised and delighted with what we get.

Living in Kansas City, I looked forward to channel 9's annual reports on Secret Santa. Channel 9 had made a deal to never reveal his identity and was allowed to follow him on his Christmas rounds. Santa became a millionaire in Kansas City but never forgot the Christmas in Louisiana he had lost a job for the umpteenth time, had no money and was hungry. A stranger bought him a meal and gave him \$20. It gave him the courage to go on. As Christmas approached, he took envelopes of cash and handed them out in places where people likely were in need of some help: laundromats, Dollar Store parking lots, cheap cafes and the unemployment office parking. In later years, if he heard a particular story of woe involving utilities or heating or shelter, he might respond to a specific need. The Christmas before I moved here, Santa was dying of cancer and allowed his identity to be revealed. Since then others have taken up the practice of giving randomly to those not expecting a Christmas gift. It is one way to approach giving in a way that is well received.

How many of you have seen the "White Envelope in the Tree" story? It is a true story and it is bigger than what circulates. The story was originally published in the December 14, 1982 issue of Woman's Day magazine. It was the first place winner out of thousands of entries in the magazine's "My Most Moving Holiday Tradition" contest in which readers were asked to share their favorite holiday tradition and the story behind it. The story was written by Nancy Gavin. Briefly it goes like this: "It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past ten years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas—oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it—overspending... the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma—the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters,

dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears.

It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids – all kids – and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more."

But the story doesn't actually end there either. Nancy died two years later. The three siblings have a foundation and a website: giving101.org and The White Envelop Project to support teaching children the value of giving.

Which leads us to our second aspect of the joy of giving—do we have something worthy to give.

Not everyone has envelopes of cash to distribute. The Nativity story is not that helpful because the magi bring gifts of Frankincense, Gold and Myrrh. For goodness sakes gentlemen, how practical are those as baby gifts? Pricey, yes! So for better guidance we look to the message of the Christmas song, The Little Drummer Boy. Originally known as "Carol of the Drum" the popular Christmas song was written by the American classical music composer and teacher Katherine Kennicott Davis in 1940. First recorded in 1951 by the Trapp Family Singers (Yes, THAT Trapp Family), the song was further popularized by a 1958 recording by the Harry Simeone Chorale. In this holiday classic, a poor drummer boy laments he has no gift fit for a king. But he can play his drum for the baby Jesus.

Everyone needs to believe she/he/they have something worthy of contributing to the world. Sometimes our joy is stymied because we get caught up in "lack" thinking. We convince ourselves we have nothing to give. It may be we believe we have no money to buy gifts. We have no talent to create gifts. In all of our lack thinking we overlook some of our greatest gifts—the gift of time shared with others. We overlook our ability to connect with others and offer encouragement; someone to listen deeply to witness the joy and pain of others. We discount the preparation of food, the singing of carols, the simple letters of gratitude we can give to those we interact with all through the year. We discount our ability to serve others volunteering. We discount the simple gifts we can give to those who are alone, without family and friends. We discount and devalue the gift **we are** in the world. How foolish is that?

If you need me to tell you today that you are a gift in the world and all that you are and all that you give is worthy and enough, please consider yourself informed! If a Divine Creator deemed aardvarks and crocodiles and giraffes and whooping cranes and every other unique creature worthy of existence, how can you doubt the truth of your creation as a unique expression of spirit?

This holiday season may you know your gifts are worthy. May you freely give and discover the gifts are joyously received. May you connect with the joy of giving. Merry Christmas every one.