

Take Another Look at Christmas

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:8-20

December 30, 2018
Faith Community

Whether I need to or not, I get new clothes every ten years or so. And if anything, that's an understatement. From the days of my youth, the acquisition of clothing has been a constant trial by fire for me.

For example, as much as I love Christmas, there was one tradition that cast an ominous cloud over my holiday merry making. It had to do with my dear old Aunt Vega. She was my great aunt actually, my grandfather's sister, and came over on the boat from Sweden with the rest of the clan, bringing the Swedish Christmas tree that I spoke about last Christmas Eve.

I loved my Aunt Vega, and there's enough stuff there for a sermon all its own, but my point for you now is that when Christmas came around, I knew what would happen. Aunt Vega would get me clothes. Oh, man! Did you or do you have a relative like that?

My world was an Erector Set, Lincoln Logs, a put-it-together radio, something for my Lionel trains, anything, but a sweater, or shirt, or socks, oh my.

In the interest of full disclosure, you should know that this wasn't just a Christmas thing. Every year as summer wound down and school approached, I knew the time was close at hand when mom would corral my brother and me and haul us off to the nearest changing room and we'd try on an endless array of shirts, scratchy pants, and other things too fierce to even mention.

Scroll ahead a few centuries to July of 2008. My newest sport coat at the time was a good ten years old, I'd gotten 20 some-odd years out of my brown shoes, and I suppose it was no coincidence that the ominous rumblings about my haberdashery habits emanating from the two women in my life were approaching Mount St. Helens status.

Notice I said two women. Little girls tend to grow up, and sometimes become fashionistas in the process, as indeed happened with my daughter. So picture, if you can, this poor old wretched preacher being whisked away like a lamb to the slaughter, only to end up in some men's store.

The first sign of trouble once we got there came when I heard my wife say to the salesperson, "I'm going to spend a lot of money here, so I want your best deals." He got a kind of glazed over look on his face as visions of sales receipts danced in his head, and with that we set about the daunting task of restoring yours truly to sartorial splendor.

We got to be good friends before all was said and done, this salesperson, my two women and me. I learned he was a Methodist and thought, if Jesus can love a shabby Presbyterian he could surely find mercy for a Methodist, so I offered to call his pastor with the news that there should be a good offering coming up on the next Sabbath, but my new friend didn't think that was necessary.

The other sign of trouble came when all was said and done, and my two women wouldn't let me near the check out area of the store, but the glazed over look on the salesperson's face had now grown to a brilliant luster, which made me think we were approaching a second mortgage.

They let us borrow the company fork lift to get the stuff out to the car, and as we drove away to the sound of Champaign bottles popping in the background, my one consolation was that I shouldn't have to go through this again at least until the Lions won the Super Bowl.

Friends, you can dress me up all you want, but at heart I am still my dorky self, most at home in my jeans, flannel shirts and white socks. Here during this holiday season we see the God of the universe, surrounded by untouchable splendor, the creator of all that is, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, showing up looking pretty much like the rest of us.

He put all that glory aside to show us that he loved us just the way we were, with all our hang-ups, shortcomings, and even flannel shirts.

Here's the invitation. Maybe we don't have to try so hard. Maybe we don't need to prove ourselves or impress anyone. Maybe climbing the ladder isn't such a big deal after all. There just might be better ways to spend our time and energy. Maybe we can quit trying so hard to earn something that we can only get for free. And praise God for every chance to get the hint.

On Friday, January 12, 2007, a youngish man in jeans, a long sleeved T-shirt and Washington Nationals baseball cap went to a subway station in Washington, DC, pulled a violin

from its case, kept the case open in front of him for hoped for contributions, and began to play, a fiddle playing street musician.

He was at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Stop, in an arcade at the top of the escalators. He began at 7:51am, and played for 43 minutes.

As it turned out, this fiddle player was Joshua Bell, the latest recipient of the Avery Fisher prize, which recognizes the finest classical musician in the country. The fiddle he played was hand crafted in 1713 by one Antonio Stradivari and was valued at \$3.5 million. His repertoire that day at the subway stop included some of the world's most hauntingly beautiful music.

It was an experiment of sorts initiated by the Washington Post to see how people might respond. The whole thing was caught on video as 1,097 people passed by Mr. Bell and his open violin case during that 43-minute rush hour time spot.

How did the people react? As you might expect, there was no pattern along lines of nationality, gender, race or age, as to who would stop to listen, or who would put any money in the case, with just one exception.

Every time a child walked by, he or she tried to stop, watch and listen. And in every case, a parent or other grown up pushed the child along.

So here we have a world famous musician, playing some of the finest music ever composed, on a priceless instrument, and his take was \$32.17.

But something important was going on there.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, used to define spirituality as paying attention. And maybe that's what's wrong. Instead of paying attention we get distracted.

Whatever sparkles and shines. The latest and greatest. Whatever can make us more appealing, available, attractive or competitive. Maybe it makes cool noises, or sets a pace that keeps us ahead.

We have deadlines, quotas and numbers to meet or exceed. We're so distracted that even the Son of God himself comes to earth looking like the rest of us, and we sophisticated types hurry past in search of the very thing he

came to provide, and end up throwing a bit of spare change at all that beauty.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it so wonderfully when she wrote,

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only [those] who see take off [their] shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.¹*

Friends, this has been such a tough year. Some of us have seen more than our share of deaths, critical illnesses, broken hearts and broken lives. The economy takes its terrible toll, and there are relational issues galore. Maybe we should pay attention. Life as usual doesn't work, and it really never did.

***For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," as cited in Nicholson & Lee, eds. The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse. 1917.
<http://www.bartleby.com/236/86.html>