

What's the biggest Christmas present you've ever received? Well, if you're the United States of America back in 1886, you would've needed a bigger tree. You see, that was the year the country of France gifted our nation with the Statue of Liberty. And this next one, I'm not sure any other present could ever top it. I mean, on December 22, 1864, at the time of the Civil War, General William T. Sherman presented President Abraham Lincoln with the city of Savannah, GA. Like, what would next year's present be, right—the whole *state* of Georgia? Then, going all the way back to 1514, we find the origin of the white elephant gift exchange—a real white elephant. I kid you not—King Manuel of Portugal presented Pope Leo X with a full-size white elephant. And the pope loved the pachyderm so much that he even commissioned the artist Raphael to paint a portrait of him riding his beloved pet. Talk about some gifts, huh?

But my guess is, no matter what—no matter how great, no matter how big, no matter how expensive—for grown adults like you and I, Christmas isn't so much about *getting* presents anymore as it is *giving* presents. After all, most of us already have everything we need—if we didn't, we could always go out and buy it ourselves. While it might take a few months to save up, really we are pretty self-sufficient—we can just pick up whatever we need on our own. Y'know, whenever I buy for another adult, I always have a tough time finding just the right gift. Because, no matter who they are, I know they already have what they need. Anything I could possibly give them just feels so unnecessary, so excessive, so redundant, that at best it can only be the cherry-on-top. Before I even purchase their gift, I can already hear them opening it and saying, "Oh great, another oven mitt . . . yet one more argyle sweater . . . a set of dishes that I now have to find room for in my cupboards." At our stage of the game, for grownups like us, Christmas seems to be more about giving than it is receiving.

And the Bible sure seems to talk this way too. It tells us that the Christian way isn't about how much we can *get* but about what we can *give*—making the best use of what we have—in the church we call that *stewardship*. The Word of God says things like, "It's more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) and "The Lord loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). It also tells us to serve our neighbor—to tithe to our congregation, to give to the poor, to provide for those in need. And so isn't it just the Christian thing to do—to look for ways we can *give* at Christmas rather than focus on what we will *receive*?

Really, when you think about it, Christmas isn't for big people like us at all . . . but really for *children*. It's for youngsters who can't supply their own need—who are forced to rely on the generosity of others. They look up to us to get what they can't get for themselves. And, y'know what, I really don't mind that. Like, even better than receiving a pair of tacky light up socks that I don't really need and probably won't ever wear anyway, is watching the anticipation on the faces of boys and girls at Christmastime. As a father, just the thought of my kids running down the stairs still in their pajamas, barely able to contain themselves; wearing a grin from ear to ear as they take inventory of the pile under the tree; and then, using every ounce of strength to tear, rip, and shred their way through wrapping paper, boxes, and bows; just imagining *that* gives me such satisfaction. *My* excitement comes from my sons' and daughter's *excitement* on that special day. No doubt, Christmas is really meant for children.

Even our Gospel text this evening seems to tell us that Christmas is about little people. Luke chapter 2 has a lot to say about them—they're mentioned several times. Over and over again, you hear these words repeated—*child—son—baby*. The whole Christmas story is kid stuff. And how does this story often get retold? Christmas pageants! Sunday school reenactments of a tiny Mary and Joseph, cradling a baby doll, and placing it in a makeshift manger. Little cherub choirs serenade us with "Away in a Manger." Everything during this season is so geared toward children, is even *about* a child.

So tonight, as a big person, do you hear the Christmas message for the umpteenth time without actually hearing it? Does tonight's story about the baby born in Bethlehem and lying in a manger sorta fall flat? It's Christmas Eve and not even 8 o'clock yet, but is the spirit of the season already wearing off? That's the danger of being all grown up—you feel too independent, too autonomous, too self-reliant—like there's nothing you *can't* do for yourself. You run the danger of feeling like you already have everything, like you've got it all together, and there's not a thing left that you still need. But

when you're too big and have so much, you risk missing Christmas. And you run the danger of losing the greatest gift—arguably the *only* gift—there really is. And for God the Father, who loves to give to His children, that's enough to ruin Christmas.

The truth is, you *are* still just a kid. By Baptism, you have been adopted into the very family of God. You are His child, no matter how many miles you put on the odometer. And He's been watching you pretend to be big, He's seen how you like to play house and make-believe that you're all grownup. But to Him, you are still so small. Because when it comes to how our Lord measures maturity, who here doesn't still have a ways to go? Without God, isn't our growth stunted in the areas of holiness and godliness and righteousness? And left on our own, could we ever hope to change that? Up to us, things look pretty hopeless.

But God knows your need, and this year He's slipped something yet again under your tree—what is it? Tonight's Gospel lets you pick it up and shake it and hear it rattle. And it's a dead giveaway what's inside. Tonight that rattle says, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" Wow, a Savior! Just what you always needed! How did God know? Well, He knows your need even better than you do.

But wait, isn't Christmas about giving not getting? And what about all those Bible passages that say "It's more blessed to give than to receive," and "The Lord loves a cheerful giver?" Well, that is true. But without your Savior Jesus Christ, do you even have much to give? I mean, without Him, wouldn't it feel like you had nothing—wouldn't everything lose all meaning—wouldn't you always feel empty? Funny how when you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness—when you're on the lookout for the precious gift of your newborn Savior—then suddenly all these things are added to you. When you have Jesus, you have everything! It's then that God invites you to take a little bit of all that you now have in Jesus Christ and share it with others. Sprinkle a little forgiveness here, drop off a little love and kindness there, give a dash of generosity wherever you go. And discover the added gift of now *being* God's gift to the world, just like your Savior is to you.

But for now, that can wait. First, experience Christmas like a little child. Wake up from your self-delusion, and feel like a kid again. Because to God, you still are. And as a gracious, doting, loving Father, He still has so much He wants to give you.

When it comes time for Communion, come racing to this altar, like you used to run to the tree. Here He's got it all set up for you—the tree of salvation, the cross of Jesus Christ. It's decorated with the tinsel and lights of your Savior, the Light of the World. But the best part is all the precious gifts He's got waiting for you under that tree—His means of grace.

Lovingly wrapped up in the paper and bows of bread and wine is your Lord's saving body and blood. No wonder He was born in Bethlehem—Bethlehem, when translated, literally means "house of bread." And God gives you this night Jesus Christ, the very bread of life and cup of salvation. It is your heavenly Father's present to you, His needy child.

What's the biggest present you've ever gotten? Now you know.

Christmas is for children, alright—the children of God. It's for you. Merry Christmas!