

## **A Homily for Christmas 2008**

St. James' Episcopal Church  
Boardman, Ohio  
Father Kelly Marshall, Rector

In the Name of the Holy Child of Bethlehem. Amen.

Isn't Christmas a time to remember? Even those of you who are children remember last Christmas! And those of us who are older remember the Christmas celebrations of many years. Decorating the house for Christmas is an event which helps us remember other Christmases. Last Saturday evening, I found myself opening boxes filled with Christmas decorations. It was a time for me to remember--and as I found one particular felt ornament, I remembered something. I'd like to share that memory with you.

It happened at Christmas many years ago, when the children still were children--perhaps the year Jennifer was eleven and Adam eight. That particular year, Kate had prepared an activity for them: they were making their own Christmas tree ornaments from felt, to give as gifts to their extended families. As we worked around the table with scissors, and Elmer's glue, and glitter, and designs to trace, Jennifer asked a question: *"Why do people give things at Christmas?"*

I gave an answer which satisfied her, but it left her brother Adam as curious as ever. He repeated the question: "But, Dad, why do people give things at Christmas?" Once again, I gave my theologically correct and age-appropriate answer. But it wasn't quite right. He was, after all, in a getting mode that year, not in a giving mode. He always had been a kind child, and Adam did understand the idea that giving-rather-than-getting stands at the heart of this season. But his eight-year old spirit was struggling.

After a third and a fourth time of his asking the very same question worded the very same way, and of my answering with variations on a theme, I responded with a bit of frustration: "Adam, that's just the way it is. People give things at Christmas. They just do!"

I remembered all this, last Saturday evening as I touched one of those same handmade decorations and placed it with care on my mantle among the greens. All these years later, Adam is married and living in Virginia with two little boys of his own. Everyone's world has changed beyond any of our imaginings--change is what happens in life.

But I thought that night about what a really good question my children had asked us: "Dad, why do people give things at Christmas?" I remembered Adam being peeved at not quite getting it--and my frustration at not quite helping him understand. I also remembered a poem I found, several years later, which helped *me* understand the answer to my children's question. Here it is, a Christmas gift to you from the poet John Oxenham:

"Love ever gives--  
Forgives--outlives--  
And ever stands  
With open hands.  
And while it lives,  
It gives.  
For this is Love's  
Prerogative--  
To give, and give, and give."

"Why do people give things at Christmas?" Because human beings, by nature, love. "Love ever gives." Because people aspire to goodness, and human goodness is summed up in one word only, and the Greeks, o course, had that word: *agape*--self-giving love. This human prerogative--to give, and give, and give--is godlike.

Today Advent turned to Christmas with the darkening sky. And we tell each other a story tonight about such love--about how love like this gives, and gives again. The story is about a cave in Bethlehem, once upon a time, and about a baby being born there. And his parents called their child's name Jesus—Jeshua—because he would save the people.

Listen to this story which we've received about him, from the ancestors: Jesus of Nazareth was like no other human being they had known. He was a very good man. He was the best among us, the very best of the race--filled with agape, the love which gives, and gives, and gives again--the Love which is godlike. Jesus gave of himself. Jesus gave himself. Jesus keeps on giving himself. *Why?*

"Love ever gives--  
Forgives--outlives--  
And ever stands  
With open hands.  
And while it lives,  
It gives.  
For this is Love's  
Prerogative--  
To give, and give, and give."

+++

*"Dad, why do people give things at Christmas?"*  
Because Jesus of Nazareth was born.

*"Why do we do special things for people we don't know, Mom?"*  
Because Jesus of Nazareth was born.

*"Why do children's choirs sing, and why do we light candles, and why do we share bread and wine, and why do we give, and give, and give?"*  
Because Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Love of God, and it is just like God to give gifts. ***That's just the way it is***, for God, and for us as God's people. People give things at Christmas, because we love. We give, because we love.

*Why?* We just do--love is like that!

In the Name of the Christ Child. Amen.