

Sermon for Christmas Sunday
December 26, 2004

Deacon Robert S. Streepy

My youngest daughter Leah came by the house the other night while my wife Marcia was visiting her family in Hutchinson. Leah and I discussed our family's plans for Christmas, and during our conversation I asked the question which all fathers ask their children irrespective of their age: "Do you have a present for your mother?" Leah responded that she was low on disposable income and was not able to purchase anything expensive. I replied with that age-old holiday cliché, "it's the thought that counts."

This caused me to reflect whether the saying "it's the thought that counts" is true. I know from my experience that the gifts which have meant the most weren't expensive nor fancy but demonstrated that the giver had put some time and effort into the gift. One of my favorite artists is Berger Sandzen, who lived in Lindsborg, a small Swedish town in central Kansas. One year I opened a package from Marcia which was obviously a painting, and to my surprise and delight it was a Sandzen wood block print. The fact that Marcia would take the time and effort to find it and buy it for me made my Christmas that year.

Then there was the story in the newspaper on Christmas Day of the death of Brandi Bragg, the granddaughter of the winner of the richest undivided lottery jackpot in American history. She was only seventeen years old and she died of a drug overdose. The story noted that she had her own apartment and owned several cars, including a Hummer and a Cadillac Escalade. Her grandfather gave her \$5,000.00 a day, and not only did the money fail to buy happiness, it led to her premature death. There obviously was not much thought put into his

largess by her grandfather.

So there is apparently some truth to the saying that it is the thought that counts. In fact, the saying may be a “meme.” This term, which means “a contagious information pattern that replicates by parasitically infecting human minds and altering behavior, causing them to propagate the pattern,” was coined by the scientist Richard Dawkins, a notorious atheist, to rationalize faith. But despite the fact that “meme” seems to have a negative connotation, a meme can be either false or true. And if true, a thought or “meme” which positively affects belief as well as behavior, could have beneficial results.

So this is what I would like to do this morning on the day after Christmas: I’d like to conduct an experiment by giving all of you a thought, and let that thought affect your minds and alter your behavior, so that you’ll “propagate the pattern.” And here’s the thought I’d like to give you:

For God so loved the world that he gave His only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

That, Charlie Brown, is the true meaning of Christmas.

Marcia and I went to a wonderful show titled “Late Night Catechism” at Union Station a few years ago. An actress quite convincingly played a nun who taught elementary school, and we - the audience - were the parents of her students. She asked several questions, and if you answered correctly you won a prize. One question was “What is your Lenten duty?” After several people answered incorrectly, Marcia whispered, “It’s going to confession before Easter.” I thrust her hand up, and for her correct answer she won a glow-

in-the-dark rosary.

So the second part of the experiment could be called your “Christmas Duty.” James cautioned us that we should be doers of the word, and not hearers only. (James 1:22) And your “Christmas Duty” came from our Lord himself when he met his disciples after his resurrection. On a mountain in Galilee he told them, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19). Here, then, is your assignment: share the good news that “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” with someone else this Christmas season.

As much as we enjoy the story of the birth of Jesus, the true meaning of this season is neither the gifts nor the family gatherings, but the amazing feat God has wrought: he became one of us to reconcile ourselves to Him. And this news is so wonderful that we want to share it with those we love, know, and meet. So let us determine whether our gift - the message of God’s love - is a meme, and whether by passing it along we can change hearts and minds. I suspect that we can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. As American the poet Howard Thurman wrote,

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The true work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoners,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers,
 To make music in the heart.

Amen. Merry Christmas.