

# “Give More”

Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Part III of VI in the sermon series

“Advent and Christmas Conspiracy”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Tim Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 13, 2015, dedicated to the new members of First Church who join with us today and are now home for the Holidays and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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*“We live now, in the United States, in a culture so profoundly pagan that Advent is no longer noticed, much less observed. The commercial acceleration of seasons, whereby the promotion of Christmas begins even before the opportunity to enjoy Halloween, is superficially, a reason for the vanishment of Advent. But a more significant cause is that churches have become so utterly secularized that they no longer remember the topic of Advent.”* So wrote William Stringfellow in 1994 –

21 years ago (found as an essay in Keeper of the Word, edited by Bill Wylie Kellerman).

I think we all can agree that this “acceleration of seasons” and “vanishment of Advent” has only grown in the past 20 years. This year alone, over \$500 billion will be spent for Christmas.

In some people’s minds, a “vanished Advent and Christmas” is a really good thing. Joseph Cotto, writing in “Delmarva Now,” a Gannett paper this past week happily proclaimed the death of this season for religious reasons. He wrote:

*“There’s nothing wrong with admitting Jesus is far from the reason for the season. Those of us who do not celebrate Christmas in a religious sense are afforded the opportunity to appreciate yuletide merriment. Commercialization making Christian theology no longer the standard for accepting or rejecting the holiday is, in many respects, a saving grace. We are fortunate our country’s Christmas culture has rich traditions which transcend religious doctrine.”* Ouch!

But, seriously – Cotto’s trending truth hurts. By the way, I emailed Mr. Cotto and invited him to worship at First Church. I am awaiting his response.

In the ever increasing secular spirit of Joe Cotto, all too many of us in this room, unashamedly and unquestioningly, have been swept away by the “Spend more” spirit of

Christmas shopping juxtaposed to the “Give More” spirit of the season. In fact, I believe if we checked receipts at our deacons’ “Customer Service Desk” in the main office, all too many of us would find that our Christmas spending at least triples our annual intentions to congregation to support the mission and ministry of the church. (Remember Givers – there are only 18 days to complete your pledge, make a great gift to the church and/or complete your 2016 Pledge Cards found in the office/pew pads.... Advertising – it’s everywhere! Seriously.... We do actually need your financial support – big time).

Echoing John the Baptist’s words, it is not too late to turn this around!

While I would love to spend the entire sermon analyzing this spending trend upward for Christmas and downward for investing in our life together, allow me to return to the primary question raised by William Stringfellow, “Where has Advent gone?” What have we done with the penitential season given to us through the prophets’ writings in Malachi, Jeremiah, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and our own prophet from the New Testament, John the Baptist?

Let's start with John. This pesky prophet won't go away.

John the Baptist returns this week to call us once again to move forward toward the Christ. Building upon last week's gospel, Luke 3:1-6, today's gospel, 3:7-18, could not be clearer. Crowds of people in John's time appear in the desert like Christmas shoppers flocking for the best deals at Wilderness Walmart. They travel great distances out of the cities and into the desert to buy what John is selling – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

However, unlike Walmart greeters who smile and push a shopping cart in our general direction, John explodes and screams at the people, *“You brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin.”* (Luke 3:7ff, in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*). Nothing says “try another store!” than a Walmart greeter like this! Now, I don't know about you, but I have yet to receive a Christmas card with any of these words on it. What would you write afterwards, “Happy Advent, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Love, The Slithering Family?”

For the third Advent Sunday in a row, we are being called to repentance. Hello Wilderness Walmart shoppers, is anyone

paying attention? And by the way - what is “repentance” anyway?

Let’s break it down... Random House’s Unabridged Dictionary defines “repentance” as “deep sorrow, compunction or contrition for a past sin, wrongdoing or the like; to regret any past action.” Repentance comes from the Latin-rooted *paenitere*, which is translated “repent” and means to “regret, or to feel truly sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct.” Random House tells us that to repent means “to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one’s life for the better.” Remember, this is Random House, not John the Baptist.

As individuals, we MAY repent when we have knowingly betrayed another person, lied about them, hurt them through our actions or inactions. Clearly, to repent means to have an inner-awareness of breaking a relationship. Sometimes we know all too well that we have failed another child of God in this world. We have trouble looking in the mirror knowing we have hurt them.

Sometimes we continue blissfully unaware until they come to us and tell us how they are feeling. At that point, the burden of repentance is laid upon us. Some of us get angry or defensive at such a time as this. But we are called to be

prayerful, and hopefully, to confess our misdeeds or misspoken words so that they might receive our deep regret and apologies. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that when we repent, we become repairers of the breach, restorers of the house we live in.

But John, and hopefully all of us too, is not only concerned about confession of sins against one another. He is deeply concerned about injustices related the whole creation of God. He says, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” John is warning the emperors, kings, and common people that Christ is coming. If we are going to “get real,” we better “get real” real fast. In other words, the planet is dying – cut carbon emissions now or it will be too late! That’s repentance in John’s vocabulary.

Recognizing their guilt and need for turning their lives around, all the crowds of “Baptism Shoppers” scream, “What should we do?”

So John breaks it down. He says to all the Wilderness Walmart Shoppers, “Share your food and clothing.” The tax collectors (who apparently were checking the IRS code on shared food and clothing and missed the answer) repeat the same question. For the tax collectors, John expands the answer and tells them to stop gouging the poor through

beating them down with high interest rates on Roman taxes. This would be our equivalent of Pay Day Lenders. John shouts at them, “No more extortion! Collect only what’s required by law.”

The Roman soldiers come next. They were told what they should do. John says, “No more shakedowns. No more road side stops. No more blackmail. Be content with your rations.” For John, justice, compassion, honesty, and integrity take the place of their opposites. This is the good news which comes out of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is what a “turned around” life looks like. It is a life of justice, compassion, honesty and integrity!

Upon hearing all this, the Baptism Shoppers declare that John must be the Messiah. But John is clear that he is not the Messiah. In Eugene Peterson’s version of Luke, John says:

*“The main character is this drama, to whom I am a mere stagehand, will ignite kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from inside out. He is going to clean house - make a clean sweep of your lives. He will put everything true, in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”* (Luke 3:15-17).

That is reason for the season Mr. Cotto. Turning around!

Do we get the point? The Advent, or “the coming of God,” is loaded with opportunities to turn your life around – change from inside out, clean your house, put everything in its proper perspective – **MOVE FORWARD!** If you hoard your worldly goods, you need to share them. I am sure most of us have enough coats to wear and food to eat. We need to share what we have. But, if we are knowingly taking advantage of the poor in any way, we need to turn our lives from oppression-bearers to become justice-bearers.

Instead of shouting with the unrepentant Scrooge, “*Are there no poor houses? Are there no prisons?*” God calls us, through the prophets, to be like the repentant Scrooge of whom it was said by Charles Dickens at the end of A Christmas Carol:

*“Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew . . . and it was always said of Scrooge that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”*

What joy there is in the “turned around” Ebenezer Scrooge! He moves from keeping all for himself and gouging the poor, to giving more to all and uplifting the poor. Scrooge becomes the cover boy for Give More Living!

Repentance leads to Giving More! It is that simple!

This past week, I asked one of my personal favorite Giving Gurus, Marty Worth, a few questions about “Giving More.” As she runs the Good Samaritan Program at church, Marty brings her whole self to the ministry of serving people. Good giving brings great returns in the joy of serving. If you don’t believe me, take one look at Marty’s beautiful smile! You will see her heart!

She shared these stories of giving more and the great return of joy!

- 2 months ago, a Good Sam recipient made an \$82 donation, which is the exact amount of help received for a utility bill this past year.
- A couple who are members of the congregation went through some hard times, but now are doing very well, and they periodically make donations to Good Sam because they know what it is like to worry about paying the gas or electric bill. A business associate of theirs heard the story and he now makes donations to the Good Samaritan Fund.
- Another member of the congregation often gives me a \$20 bill on Sunday. I save it and use it to buy toiletries that we offer on Good Samaritan Day.

- I arrive on Monday morning for work and will find a check slipped under my door for Good Samaritan Fund. The reason often given is, “I have a passion for the work of Good Sam” or “I had this compelling desire to help those in need and I know that this money goes directly to them”.
- The Good Samaritan Fund is a beacon of light on Broad Street that the congregation has adopted as a mission of social justice and feels called to do what Jesus would have us do.

Thank you Marty and Givers... And AMEN!

Besides making an incredible difference in people’s lives and adding years to your life, too.... DO you know what else - “Giving More” leads to success! According to Wharton School of Business’s most highly rated professor and #1 best-selling author Adam Grant, in his book *Give and Take*, writes that being a giving person leads to success in business and life. Adam Grant writes, “For generations we have focused on the individual drives of success: passion, hard work, talent and luck. But in today’s dramatically reconfigured world, success is increasingly dependent on how we interact with others....” Having studied givers and takers for a long time, Grant reflects, “there is something distinctive that happens when givers succeed: it spreads and

cascades. When takers win there is usually someone else who loses” (page 10). So giving more is not only good for your soul and for your health – it is good for business.

I am so moved by the multiple effects of giving more. Before we leave Advent Three...I would like to share one more thought about the connection between repentance and giving more.... Many of us would rather not talk about repentance. I find this particularly true in the United Church of Christ. We don't like it because it doesn't make us “feel good.” But I believe nothing makes us feel better than “true repentance.” I believe when we are sensitive to the pain we cause others in thought, word and deed and when we choose to make amends by healing the rifts, we create peace where there was no peace, we bring justice to an unjust world, and we feel better than ever before.

This is true in our individual lives. But in addition to our individual lives, we are all part of systems that are hurt or unreconciled – family systems, church systems, school systems, work systems. When the systems of which we are a part are unreconciled, so are we. When they are broken, they hurt us and future generations. Healing the past and dealing with the present allows us to find a joy that will guide our future in Christ.

Repentance leads to joy. That is what we learn from Zephaniah and Philippians. The Prophet's cry and the Paul's passionate words to the church in Philippi call to us to discover the joy of faith. It is joy that grows out of repentance and turning our lives and the life of injustice around. This joy is not found throughout Zephaniah's prophecy as he has ranted and raged about people's faithlessness and injustice. But as he comes to end of his prophecy, he sets the record straight.

Some say that he didn't even write these words because they seem so out of place. But I believe that very last words of Hebrew Scriptures point forward to Christ when Zephaniah says, *"You have carried your burdens long enough . . . I will bring you back home – a great family gathering! . . . You'll see with your own eyes – all those painful partings turned into reunions! God's Promise will prevail!"* (Paraphrased from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, p. 1724).

You see, true happiness and joy do not come out of a cushioned life that never struggles, bears hardship or faces sacrifice. A heart of true joy is never found in luxuriously coddled lives, but in men and women who achieve and dare despite the sickness, pain and struggles of their lives. True joy comes from the struggle of the soul. It grows out of exile and poverty of the heart. This is the Advent Conspiracy.

The Advent of joy comes from true repentance.

And when we know Joy – we give more.

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