

Last month, Joan started asking me what I wanted for Christmas. This is a ritual for us. **She starts asking me what I want around the first of November, but I put off telling her until Christmas Eve.** She operates best under pressure. Plus, my first thoughts are never my best. What I want on November 1st, is never what I want by Christmas. This November 1st, I wanted a new pair of boots. By the end of November, I wanted a pocketknife. **Last week I wanted a new coat, but now I'm thinking a cardigan sweater would be nice.** That's how to tell you're getting old, when you want a sweater for Christmas. A cardigan sweater, please, with a pipe, and house slippers. **Just like Ward Cleaver.**

The Beaver, I mean Sam, wants a bow and arrow. **He believes hard times are ahead and put forth a convincing argument that there'll be a return to hunting and gathering.** Spencer was his usual reserved self when we asked him what he wanted. Money. He's saving for a car. Joan wants the same thing every year—a bottle of Obsession perfume. **She asks for that, because it's the one gift I can't mess up.** She drives me to the store, walks me to the door, gives me the name and item number of the perfume, the exact amount of money I'll need, and I generally get it right. **But just in case, she's called ahead and spoken to the saleslady, who has it waiting for me when I enter the store.**

Economists are saying Christmas shopping is down this year. **I know that's true in our household.** Like everyone else, we're a little nervous about this economic head cold, hoping it doesn't turn into the flu. We want to do our part to fix things, but are unsure how to proceed. **One article I read the other day urged us to buy.** Buy stock. Buy a new car. Buy new furniture and new appliances. Buy! Buy! **But another article I read advised us to save.** Save twenty percent of our income. Build our savings. Save! Save! We're going to do both. Joan's going to save, and I'm going to buy.

Isn't it interesting that both articles left out the one thing we could all do that could likely make a real difference in the lives of people? Not buy. Not save. But give. Give.

Our gospel reading this morning is the Christmas story in two sentences, what we would get if Reader's Digest did a condensed version of the Bible. **John had this knack of boiling down sophisticated theological truths to their essence.** This verse has become shorthand for the gospel, which is why we see it on handmade signs at football games. **Just this week I saw a store selling drink coasters with "John 3:16" written on them.** Does it seem slightly disrespectful to have a great truth written on something that is going to have coffee and soda pop slopped all over it?

When I first began writing, my publisher sent me to a Christian book convention in Nashville, Tennessee. I'd sit in a booth and sign books. **People would always ask the same thing, "Can you write your favorite Bible verse."** I thought that was a little odd, like asking me to write down the name of my favorite child, which of course depends upon the day. **But the first time this happened, I hesitated, unsure what to write, when the woman helping me bent over and whispered in my ear, "Just write John 3:16. That's what everyone does."**

It is everywhere. **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."** And the next verse, "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

But I remember the first time I read it with real awareness. It hit me like a hammer. I loved the generosity of it. For God so loved the world, he gave... I loved the expansiveness of it. For God so loved *the world!* **Up until this, the writers of the Bible, not always but generally, were inclined to think God loved their group a little more, loved their tribe or nation more, and then you get to John and he just rips off the gates and throws them to the side.** For God so loved *the world.*

Then this beautiful, spacious verse got taken over, and people did what we always tend to do. They started shrinking it. Put the gate back up. **Hurried past the “God so loved the world” part to get to the “whosoever believeth in him should not perish” part, and pointed their finger at someone whose belief in Jesus wasn’t a mirror image of their own and shut them out.** It went from being a proclamation of great and generous love, to a weapon—*Believe, or else!*

Christmas time rolls around and it makes you think. **Did God send his Son just to redeem and transform people who think like me?** Oh, I hope not. I hope the birth, life, and resurrection of Jesus meant more than that. **It’s *the world* God is in love with.**

I like this verse because it reminds us that the answers to the woes of the world aren’t *Buy!* and *Save!* **There was a man in the Bible who saved, who filled up his barns, then had the bright idea to knock them door and build bigger.** But it cost him his soul. No, the answers to our problems aren’t *Buy!* and *Save!*, but *Give!*.

For God so loved the world, he gave...

What do you have to give?

Times like these, it doesn't feel like we have much of anything to give. Everything feels so tight. Scarcity is in the air. And we're worried. **But we still have something to give.** Maybe it isn't money. Maybe it isn't wealth. But we all have something helpful and beautiful to give.

I was talking with my friend Jim this week. We were asking each other this question. **He said, "Angie and I have love and time to give. We're going to see if we can't adopt Demetrius."** Demetrius is a six-year-old boy they know who's the neatest little kid, but he's had a tragic life. His mother is unable to love him the way he needs to be loved. She wants to, but just can't. **Demetrius went on vacation with Jim and Angie this past summer.** They're driving up north up to Michigan to visit with Jim's family. Demetrius is riding in the back seat. They're talking about what they want to do on vacation. Demetrius says, "I know what I want." Jim asks, "What's that?" **Demetrius says, "I want someone to love me."** Well, now he's found someone who has that to give.

What do you have to give?

For God so loved the world, he gave...

Friends, you want to have a fantastic Christmas? Do what God did. Reach deep down into yourself and find something beautiful, then give it to the world.