

WON'T YOU LET HIM INTO YOUR GIFT-GIVING

Many of you will recognize the name of Robert Fulghum. He is the author of the book, "All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten." In his book he tells a wonderful story about his daughter Molly.

When Molly was seven years old, she liked to help pack lunches each morning for her brothers, her dad, and herself. Into each bag, she would put sandwiches, apples, milk money, and sometimes she would add a surprise note or treat.

One morning for no apparent reason, she gave her dad, two bags: one regular lunch sack and another rumpled bag held together with duct tape, staples, and paper clips. "Why two bags?" her dad asked. "The other one is something else, just some stuff. Take it with you." Obediently, dad stuffed both sacks in his brief case, kissed his daughter goodbye and rushed off to his office.

When lunchtime came, Robert pulled out both bags. While eating lunch, he tore open the special bag and poured out the contents on his desk: 2 hair ribbons, 3 small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies. Dad smiled as he examined Molly's trinkets, he was touched. But then responsibilities called. He had to rush off to important matters. Quickly he swept the desk clean into the trash basket, left over lunch, Molly's junk and all. There wasn't anything valuable there, nothing he really needed. However, that evening, Molly came in while dad was reading the paper and this conversation took place.

Where's my bag?

What bag?

You know, the one I gave you this morning. I forgot to put this note in it. (She hands over the note.) and besides I want it back.

Why.

Those are my things in the sack, daddy, the ones I really like. I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn't lose the bag, did you, daddy? Tears puddled in her eyes.

Oh no, I just forgot to bring it home.

Bring it tomorrow, O.K.?

Sure thing, don't worry.

As she hugged her dad's neck with relief, he unfolded the note that had not made it into the sack. It read, "I love you, Daddy."

Molly had given her dad her real treasures, all that a 7 year old girl held dear. Love in a paper sack and dad missed it. Not only missed it, but had thrown it away because he didn't see anything valuable there. "O dear God forgive me," he prayed as fathers often have to do. Robert Fulghum rushed back to the office that night to search through the garbage for Molly's jewels. Fortunately, he got there before the janitor and found them. He had to wash mustard off the dinosaur and spray away the smell of onions with breath freshener, but he found them.

The next evening he returned the precious sack to Molly, and he listened attentively as Molly described the importance of each and every item in the bag. Several days later, dad got to take the bag to work again. He felt forgiven. And trusted, and loved, and a little more comfortable wearing the title, Father. He concludes his story with these words: "In time Molly turned her attention to other things, found other treasures, lost interest in the game, grew up. Me? I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for its return. And so I still have it. If the house ever catches on fire, it goes with me when I run. Sometimes I think of all the times in this life when I have missed the affection I was being given. A friend calls this, standing knee deep in the river and dying of thirst. So the worn paper sack is there left from a time when a child said, Here, this is the best I've got. Take it it's yours."

That's a beautiful heart-warming story, isn't it? Because it reminds us of a very important truth, namely this: that the best gifts of all are the gifts that money can't buy. I hope we will remember that this Christmas. From the time the Wise Men of old brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the manger, Christmas has been a time of giving. I love that. I'm all for that, especially if the gift-giving is a part of our faith response to the greatest Christmas gift of all, God's gift of the Savior to the world, God's gift of the Christ Child to you and me.

But this past week, as I thought about this whole matter of gift-giving at Christmas, I realized that the things people need most cannot be bought in any store. I realized that the best Christmas gifts of all are the ones that money can't buy. So this morning I want us to think about that together. What are the Christmas gifts that money can't buy? Of course there are many. Let me list three. I'm sure you will think of others.

FIRST OF ALL, THERE IS THE GIFT OF FAITH.

I imagine that every parent's nightmare on Christmas Eve is a certain box with these three scary words printed on top: Some Assembly Required.

A friend of mine tells a story about his father who had ordered a tree house for the kids. The time came to assemble the tree house. He laid out all the parts on the floor and began reading the instructions. To his dismay he discovered that the instructions were for a tree house but the parts were for a sailboat! The next day he sent an angry letter to the company complaining about the mix-up. Back came this reply: "We are truly sorry for the error and the inconvenience. However, it might help to consider the possibility that somewhere there is a man out on a lake trying to sail your tree house."

The point is clear: to put something together, you have to have the right parts and the right instructions. This is where faith comes in. The only way you can put life together is through faith. Faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, that's what makes it work. That's the way to assemble your life, to root it in Jesus Christ through faith, to tie it to Christ, to ground it in Christ.

Let me say a word to the parents and grandparents, (aunts and uncles and cousins may listen too.) You can give your children a polo shirt or a cashmere sweater, or a pair of Sketcher shoes or a Mercedes, or a ski trip to Colorado for Christmas if you want to. But with all the feeling I have in my heart the best gift you can give them is Jesus Christ.

If you want to do something good for your children, if you want to give them the gift that keeps on giving, introduce them to Jesus Christ. Get them completely involved in his church. Show them how important your faith is to you. Give them the real gift of Christmas, the gift of the Christ child. Help them discover the power of the Christian faith, it's one of the best things you can give them. It's one of the best things in life.

SECOND, THERE IS THE GIFT OF HOPE.

Some years ago a military plane crashed at Sonderstrom Air Force Base in Greenland. Twenty-two people were killed. The runway and the nearby fields were strewn with bodies. It was a tragic and horrible moment. There was only one chaplain on the base at the time and the entire burden was laid on him to bring comfort and the Word of Christ to a shocked community staggered by the horrendous accident. But there was little time to mourn that day. The grisly task of gathering up and identifying the bodies needed to be done.

And so, the chaplain, along with a young lieutenant who had been assigned the duties of a mortuary officer and a group of volunteers went about the awful business of picking up the mutilated bodies

and trying to identify the dead, so that their families and loved ones back home could be notified. It was a heartbreaking and exhausting task, but it had to be done. The people worked in shocked silence well into the night until they almost dropped from fatigue. When every last remnant of death had been picked up, they each went silently to their individual rooms.

That night, after midnight, there was a knock on the chaplain's door. Outside stood the young lieutenant, the mortuary Officer. He said nothing. He just stood there and wept. After some moments, the young lieutenant spoke through his tears and said to the chaplain, "As we were picking up the bodies today, I realized something. I realized that the only other people out there with us were the people who go to church here. I have always been an unbeliever, and I used to ridicule these same people who were out there with us. Yet they are the only persons who would, or perhaps could, do what we had to do today. It must have been their Christian spirit that could help them see beyond the horror to the hope."

That tragic day turned around the life of that young lieutenant. As he had admitted, he had never been religious, had seldom gone to church except for weddings and funerals, but from that time on he was a new man. Christ was born in his heart. From that time forward, he took an active part in the Christian ministry of that base. Then he did an unheard of thing- he extended his tour of duty in Greenland for an extra year. He was the first person in the history of that base to do that. He did it because he wanted to be able to tell others the story of how the power of the Christian Hope had changed his life.

If you want to give your loved ones a great Christmas present this year, give them the gift of Christian Hope. On page after page of the New Testament we find it: the Good News that God will win, that nothing can defeat him; that ultimately God and goodness will have the victory and that when we put our hope in Him, nothing, not even death, can separate us from His watchful care and His love and His triumph. Once each year, Christmas comes along to renew our hope and to remind us that the darkness of this world cannot overcome the light of the world. First there is the gift of faith; second, there is the gift of hope.

THIRD AND FINALLY THERE IS THE GIFT OF LOVE.

Back during World War II, four young American soldiers who had been on the front lines of battle for some time, were sent back away from the fighting to a small French village for a little R&R. When they arrived in the village, they suddenly realized that it was Christmas Eve. They began to discuss how they would like to spend Christmas. One of the soldiers said, "You know, as we were coming into town earlier, I noticed an orphanage on the outskirts of the village. Why don't we go

there in the morning and take some Christmas joy to those children?" The others liked the idea and the more they talked about it, the more excited they became. So they went out and bought all kinds of toys and candy and clothing, food and books and games, and early the next morning, they showed up at the front door of the orphanage with wonderful Christmas presents for all the children.

The orphanage director was pleased and all the children were delighted as they opened their gifts. All the children that is, except for one little girl who stood quietly off to the side. She appeared to be 5 or 6 years old and her face looked so very sad. One of the American soldiers noticed that she was not participating, and he asked the director about the little girl. "O, bless her heart," said the director, "We just got her last week. Both of her parents were killed in a car wreck. There was no one to take her in, so we brought her here."

The soldier went over to the little girl and gently said to her, "It's Christmas morning and we have wonderful Christmas presents here, toys, clothes, candy, food, books, and puzzles. Which would you like? What do you want most for Christmas?" And the little girl said, "I want somebody to hold me."

Maybe that is the best Christmas gift of all, someone to hold us. As somebody once put it, "Rich is not what you have. It's who you have beside you." Well, this sacred season comes along once each year to remind us that "Love Came Down at Christmas," that God is even now reaching out to us with open arms, and that he wants us to accept His love and to pass it on to others.

Faith, Hope, and Love- they are not only the best Christmas gifts, they are the best things in life.