

DECEMBER 14 - 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13

It's time to make the turn toward Christmas. Today's text identifies for us the deepest impulse of Christmas. Did you catch it?

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

We experience at the heart of Christmas this deep impulse to “increase and abound in love for one another.” It's why we want to give each other gifts. Something about all the commercialized retail madness threatens to change this holy impulse of abounding in love for one another into something altogether different. The word is reciprocation. Reciprocation lives in the world of social debt. Someone gives you a gift and you feel an obligation to reciprocate. It runs deep in the human race. It's not a bad thing; it's just not what Christmas is about. Underneath reciprocation lives expectation, which takes us away from the realm of love altogether and into the burden of meeting expectations. Reciprocation counterfeits love. Again, not a bad thing, but it is not “abounding love.”

Christmas is all about the unutterably extravagant abounding love of God. The fullness of God comes to us in the frailty of an infant.

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6 NIV)*

This is pure gift: abounding love. In the realm of abounding love, there is no reciprocation—only more love. The response to abounding love is not reciprocation but deep receiving leading to deepening relationship. Reciprocation is mostly about the giver meeting a requirement. Abounding love is always about the receiver. The difference is palpable.

I will forever remember a particular Christmas from my youth. My mother knew how to make Christmas an experience of abounding love. Her impulse was to give my two sisters and me something as over-the-top as the gift of Jesus on that first Christmas. On this particular Christmas Eve, which was always the timing of the gift, she passed out envelopes. Inside each envelope was a card on which was written a short rhyming poem. I will forever remember my card. It read, "You may want to keep it under keys and locks, but it's already in a pretty nice box. You know our love for you is great, the secret code is 2-8-4-8." My two sisters received similar rhymes also with numbers. We ran to our rooms to discover they had given each of us our own telephone and dedicated line. Mine was one of those phones in a woodgrained box that hinged open to reveal the dial pad and hand receiver. As a young teenager who lived for friends, this gift absolutely blew me away. I remember running back through the length of the house at top speed to embrace my mother with the most massive hug I had ever given her, probably before or since. In a spirit of abounding love, I said to her, "Thank you so much, Mom. I love you so much." Later that night, my dad pulled me aside and told me, "John David, you will never know how much your response to your mother's gift meant to her."

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

The Christian New Year – J.D. Walt