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Poor As We Are??

Isaiah 43:19-21 (NIV) See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NIV) ...[God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

If you Google the phrase "*I hate Christmas*" you get two hundred and thirty four million results. However, if you, in turn, Google the phrase "I love Christmas" you get one **billion**, seven hundred thousand results. It seems that the Christmas-lovers outnumber the haters about seven to one. But whichever camp you find yourself closer to, the mere fact of these results suggest that indeed the Christmas season, the Advent season as we call it in the life of the Church, evokes strong feelings. Yet even those who find themselves most adamantly and excitedly in the "I love Christmas" camp also, I would wager, find themselves from time to time with some very mixed feelings about this season. There are the mixed feelings that we all probably have about seeing Christmas inventory and decorations beginning sneak their way onto store shelves around Labor Day, there are the mixed feelings many of us may have as we look at our rapidly filling calendars for December and wonder if maybe it would be heresy to suggest that some of the Christmas parties might be spread out throughout the year instead of concentrated into three hurried, harried weeks. For some, there are the very

mixed feelings about celebrating a season whose images everywhere are of happy, contented, charming families when their own family has suffered a loss that just leaves a hole that hurts so bad or who know that their family will never, ever live up to the perfect portrayals.

But this morning, I want to suggest to you, as we begin this Advent, this Christmas season, that one of the most important reasons that you and I may greet this season with mixed feelings is that there is something about the season that pushes us to feel **inadequate**. Now, while on this glorious sunshine-y day it may be hard to capture the feeling evoked in our Advent theme's hymn title "In the Bleak Midwinter," all of us have surely asked the question that lines that we focus on today ask: "*What can I give Him, poor as I am?*" Now, in a way, that sentiment is understandable: in the face of a God who tenaciously and sometimes seemingly unaccountably loves this world, who loved it so much that He became human, in the face of that extravagant gift of God offering God's own life to us, what, indeed, **can** we give to God, give to Jesus, that would be at all adequate, at all appropriate?

So I do think that the hymn's question – What can I give Him" – is indeed the key to some of the anxiety that some may be feeling, key to that feeling of wonderment and even weakness and inadequacy. Last week, Barbara and I enjoyed looking together at one of the catalogs that are coming by the freight car load this time of year; this one was entirely devoted to dressing your dog in the Christmas spirit. (I don't know how we get on these mailing lists!). Not only do I not have a dog to dress up, I realized that the whole point of the catalog was to try to make me feel anxious and inadequate for in fact not even wanting to dress my dog in such festive finery! And the marketer

precisely hoped that my feelings would lead me to purchase something in the hopes of allaying that inadequacy. Of course, the tactic doesn't have to be anything so silly but can be much more subtle and insidious. A Disciples pastor in Phoenix by the name of Erin Smallwood Wrathen had this to say about looking at one of the catalogs that ramps up its efforts this time of year:

What concerns me is what those pages do to my sense of gratitude; ...to my ability to be rooted in the present, and satisfied with all that I have.... [The catalog's tactic] works to leave us feeling... poor in soul.... At every turn, these folks know how to make the most **from** you, by making the least **of** you. When they have packaged their product well, everything you own - heck, everything you ARE - starts to look shabby by comparison.¹

Does any of that begin to resonate with your experience? Does any of that begin to explain why, even in the midst of your anticipation, even in the midst of your love of the season, even amidst the hope that you so earnestly want to believe in, that you have these vague, inchoate feelings of inadequacy, this nagging sense that everyone around you is stronger, more blessed, has it more together, has a more perfect family, has fewer issues than you do? Do the messages in those catalogs and advertisements get inside you and subtly but ever-so-surely make you wonder whether you indeed have something to offer, something to give? Do they make you feel poorer than you want to be, poorer than you thought you were?

The Apostle Paul struggled in his own way with something similar. If you've read

¹<http://irreverin.com/2012/09/25/1573/> Emphasis mine.

much Paul, you may think of him as a larger-than-life figure, always self-confident, full-of-himself even. And yet as our scripture for today shows, even Paul was nagged throughout his life by the thought that there was something about him that wasn't quite good enough, wasn't quite strong enough, wasn't able to do what he wanted to do and pushed him to feel sorry for himself. He had to fight that weakness, as he labels it, every day of his life. So, if even Paul was subject to this sort of thing, is it any wonder that we are too? For Advent, the anticipation of Christmas, really ought to be easier than this - but we would be less than honest if we didn't acknowledge the ambivalence, the mixed feelings, the sense of inadequacy, the hurts. But having acknowledged these things, having named that they do indeed try to have power over us, the question remains, **what shall we do?**

Reverend Wrathen begins to answer that question in this way: "What we CAN do is... [to] recognize that which leaves us feeling less than whole, and refuse to try and buy our way to happiness." Indeed! But -- if the answer lies not in buying matching Christmas-themed dog dresses for your poodles, or all the other goodies that lie to you with their seductive song that if you will just buy them then you will no longer feel inadequate, no longer feel poor, no longer feel mixed feelings, then what shall we do? How can we find, like Paul found, that God's grace was indeed enough to make us rich enough to give us everything we need? Well, let me tell you a story that seems apt here:

Tony Campolo is a noted evangelical preacher, speaker, and writer who once found himself in Hawaii where he was to speak at a conference. Listen to what happened to him on the first morning of that trip. Since he had come from the Eastern

Time Zone, his internal clock woke him at 3:00 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Rev. Campolo is wide awake and his stomach is growling. He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter and orders donuts and coffee. As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30 in the morning, in walk a half a dozen prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Rev. Campolo finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing women. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to the woman next to her, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which the other woman replies nastily, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?" Well, when Campolo heard that, he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?" "Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he

says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here." His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her." So they make their plans. Campolo says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Campolo is back. He has ribbons and balloons and decorations and a sign that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over. And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake." So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!" But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away? I've never had a birthday cake before and I just want to keep it for a little while before we eat it." Harry doesn't know what to say so

he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asks.

So she gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Campolo. So he gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?" And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation. Campolo recalls, in his own words, that "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her." When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, Campolo answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."²

The mixed feelings with which you may greet this season will not be assuaged or overcome by buying stuff, seeking stuff, worrying about stuff. And you are far, far, far less poor than the culture would sometimes want you to think. Your poodles don't need matching Christmas outfits and your home doesn't need to be Pottery Barn perfect, and your families don't need to be fodder for Hallmark's next line of cards. No, *all you need*

²Story cited at, among other places that Google discloses, <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Bible/Agnes.htm>

*to remember in this season is that someone needs **you** to throw them a party.* It may not be prostitutes in Honolulu, but it might well be that person who is laboring under a hateful view of God. It might well be that person for whom your smile is the only one he or she will see all day. It might well be that person who is convinced that no one cares. And you don't even need cakes or balloons or bows. You can throw a pretty amazing party with just a simple word of encouragement, a human touch in the midst of a sometimes inhuman world, a gracious gesture to someone trapped in ugliness, a phone call or an email to someone with whom you've had a strained relationship. My friends, throw that party in was large or small this week, this season. For you are not poor, you are not poor at all. **That's** what you can bring Him!