

## “Unwrapping Boxing Day”

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Delivered by Jim Conley

Welcome to Boxing Day. Actually, Dec 26 is Boxing Day in the British Empire, or what is left of it. England, Australia, New Zealand and Canada all still celebrate Boxing Day. These days many people have the day off for the post-Christmas sales, so Boxing Day is an opportunity to extend the spirited Christmas orgy of drunken consumerism. It is surprising that it has not caught on in this country. Boxing Day has an interesting history, though. The origins, it is believed, go back to the Middle Ages, to the Winter Solstice Festival. The shortest day of the year (usually around Dec 22) was celebrated for around a month. It was the time that the harvest was in, the wood was stacked, the beer and the wine fermented, the cold weather arrived, and there was not much to do. So they had a long party. During the festival, there was one day that the lords actually served the serfs. This role reversal day was a fun day for all with hilarity, performances and revelry. The serfs received gifts from the lord, ate good food and drank all they wanted. The serfs liked this for obvious reasons. The lords liked it because it was fun and it helped keep the serfs quiet for another year. In Victorian England, that tradition morphed into Dec 26 for what became Boxing Day. Dec 26 is also the feast of St. Stephan (the first Christian martyr). On Boxing Day the gentry gave wrapped gifts of money, clothes, specialty foods and such to the servants. The gentry gave gifts to their class equals on Christmas and the lower classes on Boxing Day. The churches also opened the so called ‘poor boxes’ for the downtrodden on Boxing Day.

By the way, other remnants of the Winter Solstice festival remained into Victorian England, particularly the month long eating and drinking party. It got so bad that the Puritans under Cromwell, then the Puritans that settled in Massachusetts actually outlawed Christmas. Yes, Christmas was actually illegal here in Massachusetts in colonial times. The reason was that our Puritan ancestors did not want the Sacred Birth of Jesus lost in all the partying. Isn’t it nice that we no longer have that problem?

So Boxing Day was a fun day for everyone. The servants, who had to work on Christmas Day, got to feel important for a day. The lords and ladies got to convince themselves that they were nice and charitable people.

We can certainly think of many people here in this country that had to work yesterday. Christmas is the third busiest day of the year in restaurants. The coffee shop and market workers, pharmacies, nurses, firefighters, police, movie theater workers, lots and lots of people did not have the day off yesterday. People who work in hourly jobs might have to celebrate their Christmas today.

The 'haves' serving the 'have-nots' for a day has appeal. It seems that it would be healthy for both. There is something missing, though.

Henry Nouwen wrote about how God humbled God's self by being born a human baby, which is what Christmas is about. Who can be afraid of a little baby? According to our Gospel today, Herod was so Jesus needed to be taken to Egypt for protection. God, in the form of the baby Jesus became dependant upon human beings in order to grow up among us and living out his ministry. The mission of Christ results in another act of humility, the cross. Jesus grew up to give his life for us so that we might live our lives in God. The message for us is that if we are to follow God and Jesus; we must, like Jesus, humble ourselves by serving others.

I am suggesting to you that for all of the appeal of notions like Boxing Day, that our call to serve goes beyond one day or a few days of the year to give charitably to those in need. I am suggesting to you that charity is not the message that Jesus is teaching us. Charity maintains the world of superiors and inferiors. It is a momentary experience of generosity. Giving of yourself is about treating others as equals, not inferiors. Giving of yourself is about yourself, charity is about your money or your possessions. Giving of yourself is permanent, charity is temporary. Giving of yourself is about helping the other person feel better; giving to charity is about helping yourself feel better. Now, nobody is allowed to leave here saying that the preacher told us we should no longer be charitable. If you do, please change the names to protect the innocent.

In Genesis, Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" No, you are your brother's brother. Our mission in life is not to *create* human unity, it is to *recognize it*. God has created human unity, not us. We are all children of God, equal in God's eyes. As our reading from Isaiah this morning says, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely."

Giving and serving others is about taking responsibility to do God's work on this earth. It is about how we approach giving and serving. Giving of ourselves and serving others is central to who we are as people of God. If we view ourselves as charitable people, just giving to the needy on occasion, we are not living the life of radical discipleship that Christ has in mind for us. Jesus did not give of himself a few times a year, Jesus gave of himself totally. If we wake up each morning asking ourselves, "Why did God put this gift of 'me' in this world? How can this gift be shared with others?" If we give of ourselves mindfully and prayerfully we are living the lives that God intends for us. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, if we express that love by showing respect for all God's creation and we promote justice for all, and if we show servant leadership to our sisters and brothers both spiritually and materially; we are walking in the footsteps of Christ.

We are not called to abandon what is given to us, to throw away the gifts of life or to leave our families and work. We are called to give back to God what we have received from God by serving others. Giving and serving others is our way of capturing our own true humanity. When we give of ourselves, we become more Christlike, more connected to the family of God.

Let this Boxing Day not be about wrapping charitable gifts, let it be about unwrapping our own gifts so they may be used to serve God's creation.