

Unwrapping Christmas: Un-Following *Delivered December 18, 2011*

When it comes to most technology and cultural trends, I consider myself to be a fairly early adopter. I'm not usually one of the bleeding edge, trendsetting types of people, but I feel like I get a pretty good head start. I don't always have the latest, greatest gadgets, nor am I always involved in the hippest new experiments online, but I would say I probably get to most things ahead of other people.

I joined Twitter a little over three years ago when it was still in its fairly new stages. I had been on Facebook for a little while and heard about Twitter through a church leadership conference, so I decided to check it out. I took my standard approach to a new technology – I watched and waited, participating a little at a time as I started to feel out what this was all about.

What I discovered was that, for me at least, Twitter was a different way to stay in touch with what other people are saying about things that I care about. While Facebook for me was primarily about staying in touch with people that I had some kind of personal relationship with, Twitter was more about hearing what other influential people might be saying about things like church leadership, theology, and yes, even sports.

Twitter is based on the idea that you "follow" the people you are interested in hearing from. So when you bring up their profile on the site, you will see a little button that allows you to start following their comments. When you follow someone, everything they tweet shows up on your page for you to read. Every once in a while I have found that someone I've started following is tweeting way too much – so that my whole feed is filled up with their random thoughts. Other times I have found that what they are saying no longer holds much importance to me, and so I have the option to "unfollow" someone, which means that their content won't show up for you any longer.

As I thought about our current cultural experience with Christmas, especially now that we're just a week away from Christmas day, it occurred to me that I sometimes feel like I'm following another overzealous Twitter user. If I had to give it a name, I would say we're following @americanchristmasculture, and that the tweets keep filling up my feed with powerful, persuasive messages about how things should be for me this Christmas season. My screen would be filled with messages about more stuff, more for me, more for the people I love, more the haves and less for the have nots.

Even as we hear all of these messages, the rational part of our brain is trying to have a conversation with us. It's telling us that we should probably unfollow this; that this is probably not the thing that God envisioned when he sent Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, but it is much easier said than done. Partially that's because this pull is so strong, but partially because we're not sure what we should replace it with, what we should follow instead if we're going to stop following this way.

When we look at it objectively, there is such a strong pull in the Christmas culture towards the rich, the powerful, the ones who already have and yet we understand when we think about Jesus' life that this is not consistent with who he was or his purpose for

coming to the world. We have to consider the possibility that if we're really going to follow the Jesus of the Christmas story, then we will first have to unfollow the dominant Christmas culture.

When you read the story of Jesus' birth looking for the themes that lie under the surface, you find that his story is, from the beginning, pulling in a very different direction. When you read the rest of Jesus' story, you find just how counter-cultural his movement really was. So this morning we're going to start at the beginning of Luke's gospel and follow the thread for a few other passages to see how his life lined up with what was promised in the beginning. Let's start in **Luke 1:46-55**:

The very method God chooses to reveal himself to the world indicates that he is not going to work according to the dominant culture. On its face the idea of God being born in flesh is pretty ridiculous. Then to be born in the flesh to a peasant, virgin (but not apparently so) mother who acknowledges that she is a mere servant girl who is engaged to be married to a carpenter among the working class is even more ridiculous to the dominant culture as it practically ignores the rich, the powerful and the prestigious.

But Mary and Elizabeth standing here with their bodies both impossibly pregnant see in this act evidence that God is acting in a mighty and powerful way in Mary's pregnancy. His mighty hand is at work, Mary acknowledges, and his strong arm to save his people is on display for the entire world to see. In this child about to be born God is reminding them and his people everywhere of how God has often acted in the past – not for the haves, but the have nots, not for the powerful, but for the weak – his mercy is extended to people like that in every generation.

He scatters the proud, brings down the rulers, and sends the rich away empty-handed. All of this begins with the child in Mary's womb. He de-stabilizes the whole regime with a child, the empire trembles at this child, and God gives an alternative to following the dominant world culture. When Herod heard about his birth we already saw that he was disturbed enough to attempt to kill all the boys in the area to exterminate Jesus. Eventually the other rulers who face Jesus in the gospels find themselves in similar situations – they tremble at the sight of this peasant preacher whose power is not of this world. If you think of what you may know about Jesus, what Mary says about him here comes true – he lifts up the humble, feeds the hungry, and in everything shows mercy to Abraham's descendants so they could see God's mercy in action.

Later in the gospel, at the outset of Jesus' public ministry in chapter 4, he announces what he is about to do in terms that echo Mary's song from chapter 1. He says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to preach good news to the poor and to bring freedom to the captives and the oppressed. He says that his ministry will announce that the day of God's favor is here and now because he is here. It is his mission statement if you will, the purpose for which he has come and for which he was anointed by God. At the heart of this mission is the realization that when his Kingdom mission is completed and fills the earth it will dethrone every other competing kingdom.

When Jesus has the opportunity to articulate what life is supposed to look like as part of this Kingdom in chapter 6, he begins by saying that this Kingdom of Heaven belongs to

the poor because God's blessing and favor are upon them. You can hear the echoes of Mary's song, and later the song the angels declared to the shepherds – in the birth of this child God has announced peace on earth and the expression of his favor towards human beings. So while the kingdom of this world goes to the rich, powerful and prestigious, the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are on the other end.

And finally in chapter 18, Jesus meets a man who is both rich and powerful who approaches Jesus to have a conversation about eternal life. In the context of Jesus' day this wouldn't have been just about what happened to them after they died, but about the kind of life that was fitting for the world to come. Essentially he asks Jesus what it takes to make the transition from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of the world that is to come. How do I become part of this Kingdom that will never end and that is much more solid than any kingdom of this world? How do I participate in what God is blessing instead of what is going to fade away?

After some discussion about the commandments and how they lead to life, Jesus tells him that the one thing he must do to enter eternal life is to sell all that he has and give it away to the poor. Once he has done that, he should come, follow Jesus. The man walks away unwilling to do it, and all I can think is that he was too invested in this world and its kingdom to sell it. He has too much stock in the present kingdom and can't convince himself to part with it – it is too important to him to have the present wealth and possessions and the status that it brings.

Here's what we need to grasp this Christmas season – if we are still planning to hold onto the present world and culture and kingdom then we will never be able to enter a new kingdom and we will never appreciate Christmas for the miracle that it truly is. You can't follow Jesus and his movement without first un-following the current one. We aren't going to leave the world, but that's only because this present world needs to see someone present an alternative. The current culture needs someone to stand up to it to say that we don't have to live that way, only for the benefit of the haves, but that we have un-followed that movement so we could follow Jesus and his Kingdom instead.

Your challenge this Christmas will be to un-follow that dominant Christmas culture and to start following Jesus instead. That may mean that you buy less gifts for those who can give back to you and instead you give something away to someone who can't do anything for you. That may mean that you have a simple meal and instead go give a more elaborate meal to someone who has nothing to eat.

Whatever that looks like for you, it will bring you much greater freedom when you leave that behind. When Jesus' kingdom takes center stage, there is freedom for the captives (you included), the good news is preached to the poor and he allows everyone the chance to enter his kingdom of life. You can become the alternative you know the world needs to have presented. You know it's not working, so why keep following along with it? Let's un-follow that way, and follow Jesus' way towards a better Christmas. If we who claim to follow Jesus could take this call seriously, then I'm convinced we could pull a coup, an unwrapping of Christmas that would allow his Kingdom to be more visibly present here and now.