

Hallmark, the world's leading greeting card manufacturer, is known for their cards, ornaments, and Holiday movies especially this time of year, but they are also known for their famous slogan, "When you care enough to send the very best." In fact, now that Advent has arrived you might say that it is that time of year, again, for Christians around the world to send their very best. And, of course, there are many ways that we will express the message of Advent to the people around us. We'll mail packages of goodies, or plan trips to be with loved ones, will purchase gifts for individuals represented by ornaments on our church's giving tree. Somehow, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, we tend to find a way to give witness to God's love and grace.

However, if we had to choose only one medium through which a majority of people have tried to convey love during this season, we can probably look no further than a Christmas card. And that's good news for the greeting card industry. Depending on the source, sales have been anywhere between seven to eight billion dollars, annually. Advent and Christmas, with Christmas being the most popular of holidays, provide an enormous market.

Usually beginning around Thanksgiving Day, the traffic-jammed greeting card aisle at any retailer is only rivaled by the gnarled traffic patterns outside the stores. Whether people are looking for something with a serious religious theme to it, or something with a more humorous tone, customers are bumper-to-bumper trying to find the perfect card that puts into words what they cannot pen for themselves. The plethora of holiday greeting card choices is a sign that we're still trying to get at the heart of what psychiatrist Victor Frankl, called our "search for meaning." The sales figures alone express the consumer's attempt to say and do what Frankl believed, namely, "to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his of her personality."

This is what the apostle Paul does in our second lesson this morning, when he pens what could be considered his own greeting card message. In fact, his words are intended to reach his readers' and listeners' innermost core of being, his words are directed at their hearts and souls. He cuts to the chase: "We give thanks to our God for you." That could be on the face of the card.

Open it up, and he continues: "We thank him for the joy we feel in his presence because of your faith. May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus prepare the way for us to come to you! May the Lord make your love for one another, and for all people, grow and become as great as our love for you. In this way he will strengthen you, and you will be blameless before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes...."

You might even say that Paul's greeting has more in common to a Christmas letter we might stuff inside a holiday card. The Apostle's vision, he says, is seasoned with hope, the hope that he and his company of the faithful will eventually visit with their brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. It is a living hope that is rooted in the providence of God, it's a hope that is the hallmark of Paul's vision: He has complete confidence in God's time, and God's calendar. No wonder, then, that Paul's words of encouragement, offered in the midst of hardship, travel deeply into the hearts of the Thessalonians.

I believe that this is the same type of encouragement people need today in the midst of hardship. Because these holy days, these holidays, are for many — hollow days. The dictionary defines "hollow" as without substance, worth or character... a cavity, hole or space, a void. And during this time of year psychologists often lift up a phenomenon known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Some say it's just a case of the Winter Blues. In fact, SAD is recognized in the "The American Psychologist's diagnostic manual" as a subtype category within major depressive episodes.

So...do you think you might be SAD? Got a poor appetite, are you gaining or losing a lot of weight, experiencing fatigue and craving sweets? Do you have difficulty concentrating? Are you Irritable? Do you have increased sensitivity to social rejection? Are you regularly avoiding social situations? Do you by chance have your “happy light” on 24/7? You could be getting hollow, not holy. Sadder than a sick dog. Sadder than a person eating alone. Sadder than a funeral in the rain. Sadder than a picture without a frame. Sadder than sad.

Truth is, S.A.D is linked to issues of light and length of day, not to the temperature outside, or to the hearing of “Jingle Bells” every time we visit the mall. Still, no other holiday can elicit feelings of sadness and loneliness like the Christmas season. All five of the human senses go into overdrive during this time of year.

It might be a favorite carol or Christmas hymn, the smell of food or pine, the sights of decorations, the memory of a loved one, exhaustion or a host of other things that can trigger a paralyzing grip on a person’s emotions. From sadness to anger, happiness to anxiety, people can get so fed up with the stereotypes of the perfect Christmas, that they are willing to escape the entire experience altogether. And, given the contemporary landscape of our culture, and its consumerist love affair with Christmas, what might we do as followers of Christ this Advent and Christmas season to help people avoid the hollowness of the holidays?

Perhaps Advent for us is a time to recover the theology of the Incarnation. That is, God becoming flesh, taking on our very nature and living among us. The emphasis on family, fuzzy feelings, caroling and chocolate — are good — are fine. But a strong emphasis on the theology of Advent could help people rediscover that this Christmas season, at the heart of it, is so much more than a celebration of Jesus’ birthday.

Maybe the sensible thing we can do is decry our Greeting card Christmases by putting them in their proper, mythical places. While such views of the holidays give syrupy and unrealistic images of Christmas, that we often nevertheless cherish, they can also usher in depression and exhaustion. Days that should be full of energy and joy are empty with weariness and despair.

The holidays, when viewed and experienced as holy days, help people to savor the Savior's presence in this world. When people dread such days, it's because of feelings of emptiness or hollowness. As a pastor named Robert Hardy puts it: "I would rather focus on the power of a ministry of 'presence' than a ministry of 'presents.'"

Advent should be a hallowed time, not a hollowed time. The holy days of Advent leading to Christmas are days to run to church; and sing great hymns and carols proclaiming a God who lives in our "now's" and who invites all people to live in them fully and authentically. This is what Paul meant when he said, "We thank God for the joy we have in His presence because of you." The key word in Paul's greeting is "presence." God always lives in the present. God *is* love. God *is* here. God *is*... God lives in the present situations of people, all people.

When we refuse to, or neglect to find God in our present, in the now, our days become hollow days, not hallowed days. That's why Paul cared enough to send the very best greeting he could send. Still, we've got to **do** something. The truth is that there are a lot of folks who experience the tinsel and tapestries of Christmas without ever being inspired to actually change anything about their lives. All one can be left with after Christmas is an emptiness.

But the days ahead don't have to be "hollow." And we can do our best to try and address the *voids* that people might have in their lives during this time of year. Which begs the question how?

Well, for starters, we should pay special attention to those who are vulnerable. Card ministries, Bible studies, phone calls, special worship services—anything that will express to people that we are aware that they are grieving not only the loss of a loved one, but also the loss of celebrating Christmas without that individual. Or that there are people in our midst who may be lonely, feeling disconnected from others, or they are separated by thousands of miles from a family they love, or from friends or relatives they aren't able to see because of the pandemic.

The spiritually sound thing we can do as disciples of Christ is to reach out this Advent and Christmas season to the lost, the lonely, the forgotten, the abused and the oppressed people with whom we live each and every day. And, it has to be done genuinely and authentically with care and thoughtfulness. The best greeting is one that finds people where they are in life, not where we think they ought to be. The best greeting for Christians is one that reflects the very life of the God of Christmas, the living Christ in the greeter's life.

It may sound trite, silly, or even novel, but the best way Christians can reach out to all people this Christmas is to be real, live greeting cards! Wherever we believers go this season, we are the living greeting cards God sends to all people. Jesus, the reason for the season, was God's ultimate, ideal greeting to the world that set into motion a living, thriving institute of God's love and grace known as the church; that has flourished and has no boundaries in terms of value and purpose.

Living greeting cards express to people, who feel alone, that they are not alone. Living greeting cards show people they are loved. Living greeting cards work to release people from oppression and injustice in an unjust and oppressive world. Living greeting cards bring strength and encouragement to the weak and discouraged. So let us make sure that we care enough to send the very best this

Advent and Christmas. Let us be God's living greeting cards this holiday Season and into the New Year that is yet to come. Amen. Thanks be to God.