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Will You Be Home for Christmas?

It's starting earlier every year. It used to start after Halloween but no more. In fact, Thanksgiving was barely over when I started to hear the sounds of...The Christmas Season upon entering the mall. Then I noticed the wreaths, the plastic Christmas trees, the gift boxes and the rest of the Christmas symbols had been unpacked and strategically placed throughout the stores to us that Christmas was fast approaching.

As I reflected upon what these symbols truly represented to the masses who would invade the stores in a matter of days, I was struck by the one symbol that always seems to be missing. I've come to believe that the one symbol that seems to capture the emotions of Christmas better than any other is the symbol of...home – home for the holidays.

So many people go through so much effort and so much expense and so much hassle to get home for Christmas. I remember one Christmas Eve where that was true for my wife Cathy and I. We were in our first year of ministry and we'd just finished our very first Christmas Eve Candlelight service when I stepped outside to warm up the car for our 6 hour trip to Cathy's family home in North Bay. It wasn't just snowing, it was storming. The snow wasn't just coming down, it was coming from all sides.

For, perhaps the first only time in my life the wisdom of God overcame my entire being and I declared in a very manly voice, "I don't think it's wise to be traveling six hours in the dark, in a storm, with my pregnant wife, let's just go up tomorrow morning." At first, I thought she just misunderstood me because her immediate feedback was beyond words...it was the "female intergalactic death stare!" It was then I realized I was in trouble!

I don't remember what happened next but a few minutes later, when I regained consciousness, I was driving to North Bay in the dark, in a storm, with my pregnant wife. She had to be home for Christmas. She wanted to wake up on Christmas morning in her parents house, with the real but always too-tall Christmas tree, the smell of her mom's Christmas baking wafting through the air **AND she would risk the life of her husband and her unborn child to get there!**

In frustration, I would scream out, "What is it about home and Christmas for you?" I didn't always get it at first. I didn't grow up in a family that truly understood the reason for the season. I didn't experience the warmth, the security, the acceptance and love that occurred in Cathy's home. But I realized, soon enough, that at Cathy's family home, all these things were not only present but were overabundant.

When home is working right there is nothing better. It becomes a place of warmth, of security, of understanding, forgiveness, healing, and love. Home is where we belong. Those same words can be used to describe the relationship we can have with Jesus Christ. However, for many of us, home was and perhaps still is a difficult place to be.

What we find **Psalm 90** is the description of what home at Christmas should really be about. It is a prayer of Moses that uses the imagery of home when referring to God. The Psalm begins with these words, “**Lord, through all the generations, You have been our home.**” In other words, God, You have been the place where we’ve found security and comfort and love and acceptance and our salvation. God is the place where we belong.

But God then, goes further than that. He says if you’re My followers then I have an assignment for you. I have a purpose and a plan for your life. And part of that plan involves this: Once you have found your home in Christ, you need to point the way for others who are still seeking it, who are wandering around lost, and looking for a way in. This is not a new plan. It’s been around for thousands of years. In **Jeremiah 31:22**, the prophet asked, “**How long will you wander before you come home?**”

There are people in our neighbourhoods and in our offices and on our worksites and in our schools and even in our families who are wandering aimlessly through life without hope, without direction, without purpose, without meaning, without God or His forgiveness, His grace or the security of knowing that they have an eternal home in heaven someday.

Not only will this plan result in a whole bunch of people finding their home with God but those take up the challenge of encouraging people in their spiritual journey or pointing them toward home will revolutionize their own life as well. Nothing will stoke the fires of your spiritual life more than intentionally setting forth each day with the plan of doing your best to guide people toward their home in Christ.

When you are living on that kind of evangelistic edge that is when your prayer life is at its most fervent. Why? Because you’re asking God to give you the words to say, to lead you, and guide you. You’re saying to Him “I can’t do this on my own. I need you to help me.” Your prayer life takes on a sense of urgency that wasn’t there before.

Your worship is more heartfelt because you’re crying out to the Lord of the Second Chance. Your study of Scripture comes alive because your dependence of God is at its greatest. You know that apart from the power of God, no life is ever changed. I can’t argue anyone into the kingdom. I can’t force anyone into the gates of heaven. But God can use us if we’re dependent on Him.

So if you’ve been living a dry Christian life – if it’s been boring, if the flavour you use to describe your walk with God is plain vanilla...wake up! You’re missing the best part. It may be that you’ve found a home in Christ but then you’ve locked the door and gotten into your La-Z-Boy chair and put it back and you’ve lost sight of those people who are out wandering in the cold looking for home.

And God says that’s not the way the Christian life is supposed to lived out. That is a formula for frustration. God says what you need to do is get up off that La-Z-Boy and open up the front door and get out into world looking for people who are in need of hope, encouragement and security. You need to find them so that they know there is a God who can change their life for now and for eternity.

You might say, that sounds great but isn’t that Billy Graham’s job? Isn’t that Pastor Ken’s job? Isn’t that why we pay him? The answer from God is a resounding NO! God doesn’t want you to miss the excitement and adventure of making an eternal impact – one that will

last forever - in the life of another human being. God says, This is part of My plan for every single person who follows me. He says, "I don't want you to miss that!"

I was reminded of a great illustration of the life I just described at a funeral of a man named Bill. In a lot of ways Bill was your average guy. He was an ordinary, everyday guy. He worked as a financial consultant. He wasn't rich, he wasn't poor. He lived in the suburbs like most of us, a ranch house with a picket fence around it. He was married with a couple of kids.

He was a Christian. He didn't have any theological degrees. He didn't have a lot of letters at the end of his name. But he'd always been so grateful to God taking him off the path of self-destruction that he'd been on for so many years and turning his life around. In fact, he embodied gratefulness.

At Bill's funeral, I was struck by a number of things. First of all, I was amazed that, in the middle of the day, the place was packed with hundreds of people. They did something unusual. They put microphones out in the aisles. The pastor got up and said, "This is what we're going to do. If you are going to be in heaven someday because God used Bill to bring you the message of hope in Jesus Christ, if he used Bill to point you toward the home you can have in heaven, come up to one of these microphones and tell us your story."

As soon as he said that people started lining up at every microphone all over the church, some ten deep. As I watched this incredible parade of people continue to get out of their seat to pay tribute to this man, I was overcome with the thought of how one ordinary man lived out God's extraordinary plan.

I thought about what I could learn from a guy like Bill who lived a life of maximum impact by pointing other people toward home in Christ. Bill learned from Christ. And I think we can learn something from the way Bill followed Christ every day. My feeling was, if an average, everyday guy like Bill could be used by God to change that many eternal destinations then I could too. And so can you.

Have a tenacious love for people who are far from God

What was it about these stories? The first person described how Bill had gone into the city to do some business. A panhandler came up to him – a homeless person named Robert. He said, "You have some money for some food?" I think Robert was blown away by Bill's response. "How about if I buy you lunch?"

So Bill takes him to the restaurant and sits down with this homeless guy and tries to build a little friendship. By the time the meal was over, Bill said, "The 4th of July is coming up in a day or so. Why don't you come out to my house in the suburbs and celebrate Independence Day with us? Then he gave Robert some train fare and said, "I'll meet you at the 3:30 train on the 4th of July."

The 4th of July comes and Bill goes down the station to pick up his new found friend. The train comes and the train goes. Robert is nowhere to be found. Bill is disappointed but what he did next tells you what kind of a guy Bill was. Did he throw up his arms and say "I tried!" No. Bill got into his car and drove down to the city and began going from bar to bar

to bar in the area where Robert would likely be hanging out, looking for this guy Robert. He couldn't find him. But he didn't give up. He kept seeking, looking, and would not give up. Finally, he finds Robert asleep on a park bench in his own excrement.

Bill picked him up, cleaned him off, and put him in this car and drove him out to his home. He offered him some food, clothes and then they celebrated together. In the next few days, they had a chance to talk. And Bill explained to Robert that he was made in the image of God Almighty. He told him that God loved him and wants to take him home to heaven with Him someday.

Robert seemed excited by this prospect and said, "I'd love that!" And they prayed together and Robert asked Jesus Christ to be his forgiver and leader. I think the whole thing was divinely orchestrated because it was just a few days a few days later, Robert died. Robert made it! He is now at Home (with a Capital "H") because an average ordinary guy named Bill was faithful to the ways of Jesus Christ. Bill didn't just see a dirty homeless person when he met Robert, he saw someone whom Jesus loved deeply.

As this person wrapped up his story of Bill going from bar to bar in his frantic search for Robert, I kept thinking, "just like Jesus." Jesus said, "You want to know what My mission is, My purpose in this world, why I was born on Christmas Day and came into this world to live a perfect life and die on a cross? It is to seek and save the lost."

I thought the first thing I can learn from Bill is this. Just like Jesus, **He had a tenacious love for people who are wandering far from God.** God's love is like that. God's love pursues us. God's love chases us. In **Matthew 18:10**, Jesus tells us, "**See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you their angels in heaven see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.**"

Jesus does not want to give up on us and that's where Bill learned to have that kind of tenacious love for other people. Robert's eternity was changed because Bill did not give up on people. Sometimes I give up too easy. Sometimes I stop praying for people. Sometimes I stop looking for opportunities to point them toward home. Have you ever done that? Have you ever known somebody whose lifestyle was so out of whack, so immoral, so hostile to God, or so indifferent that you just cross them off your list?

Who have you written off because they were too far from God? Let's learn from Jesus and bring their name back onto your prayer list. Be kind to them. Look for opportunities this Christmas season to gently point them toward home. Maybe they don't have a place to come to go on Christmas Eve? Use the opportunity to invite them to our Christmas Eve service and if God lays it on your heart open up your home do it.

Meet people's practical needs in the name of Jesus Christ

The second quality of Bill that I learned at his funeral was this: he met people's practical needs in the name of Jesus Christ. There was a woman named Mary who stood up at the

microphone and said, “I’ll tell you my story. I was married for eighteen years and was blessed with two beautiful children. One day, my husband packed his bags and moved out. We’ve not seen him since. He just left. I was scared to death. I was depressed. I felt hopeless. I needed money to get by. I was a basket case.

But I knew this guy Bill and his wife Millie. They kind of rallied around me and said, “Why don’t you come to church with us?” They brought me to church and introduced me to some wonderful people who would become a lifeline for me. Then they took me out to lunch and encouraged me some more and said “God has not forgotten about you and He’ll walk you through this season in your life.” They said, “We’ll be there too.” They prayed for me and after I got up to leave, I put out my hand to shake Bill’s hand. He shook my hand and then he turned and walked away. Only then did I realize that he’d pressed something into my palm. I looked and it was two – one hundred dollar bills.

It turned out that Bill had a little place in his wallet where he would squirrel away some money. Everyday when he got up he’d say to God, “Lord, lead me to the person I’m supposed to give this to today.” Most days, God didn’t send anybody into his life. But every once in a while, God would bring somebody like Mary into his life. And Bill would be ready to give that person a tangible expression of the grace of God.

Words are great. Words can comfort and encourage but when you back up those words with a tangible expression of God’s grace there is something that cuts deep into a person’s soul. **St. Francis of Assisi** illustrated this best when he said: **“Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”**

I thought again, “Just like Jesus.” Jesus didn’t just say He loved the world. He proved it. He met tangible needs. He healed the sick. He restored sight to the blind. He gave His life as a sacrifice for all mankind. Jesus told His followers in **Matthew 5:16** **“Your light must shine before people so they will see the good things you do and give praise to your father in heaven.”**

The Greek word for “good” in this passage doesn’t mean good as opposed to evil. It means “attractive.” So Jesus said to all of His followers, “I want you to serve other people in practical ways that will “attract” them to God’s home.” That’s what He’s saying. This Christmas season is a perfect time to do that. Why? Christmas is the season of sharing. It’s the season of giving. It’s the opportunity for us to peer into the lives of people that we know and ask ourselves, “Do they have a practical need in their life that I can meet in the name of Jesus Christ.”

I think of so many people this Christmas season who’ve been laid off, who’ve been caught in the clutches of the recession. What if you know somebody like that and you drop off a Christmas card that talks about the love of Jesus Christ and you don’t sign it, don’t put your name on it, with no return address on the envelope, and you stuff it with as much cash as you can possibly give.

What kind of impact do you think that will have on someone in need? You know there going to ask, “Who’s this from?” But they’ll know it’s from someone who loves Jesus Christ because His name is on the card. They’ll know it’s from someone who’s not forgotten them, who still cares about them, and who’s saying in a tangible way, “I love you.” What would that do for somebody?

How about the single mom who lives near you? Perhaps she could use a free babysitter? What about the elderly couple down the street? Perhaps they could use some company? What about the kids of these families who are hurt by the recession? They won't understand why there's nothing under the tree at Christmas.

What if you bought some toys, wrapped them up and put it on their front step where they would find it? What do you think Jesus could do with that? Do you think someone might be a little more open to an invitation to a place where they can find out about the hope and love of Jesus Christ?

Make the most out of your chances to share the good news

The third lesson I learned from Bill's funeral was this: he made the most out of opportunities to point people toward God. I learned this from his business partner who got up and said, "Bill was a man who never had any good intentions about what he might do in the future. He did everything right then and there. The time to act was always now. If someone was in need you help them now. If someone needed Jesus you tell them about it now."

I remember what Bill's business partner said about him. He said, "I never went to a business meeting where Bill didn't at some time during the meeting and at least put the bait on the table for someone to come to church with him. When asked about his upcoming weekend, he would always mention what was going on in church and wonder if anyone wanted to come with him."

Then came the most moving moment in the whole service as Bill's wife got up and told everyone about how she had spent the last days of Bill's life with him in his fight against the cancer that would eventually take his life. She talked about how Bill had always hated hospitals and needles but he loved the opportunity. Bill, in his final days, was surrounded by people with cancer. He said, "What an opportunity to tell people about Jesus." He loved it.

On the night he died, she walked into the hospital room and found him in a drug induced state. She said, "he didn't really know where he was or what day it was but somehow in this state he'd befriended a nurse named Sophie." And Bill was lying on his deathbed saying to her gently, "Sophie, when you die, do you know for sure you're going home to heaven?" He was working on Sophie right up until the end. "That," she said, "summed up the entire purpose and life of Bill."

There are opportunities for you and me everyday if we keep our eyes open, if we keep our hearts soft, and if we keep listening to God. Bill's life exemplified and modelled what the apostle Paul encouraged his readers to do in ***Colossians 4:5: "Make the most of your chances to tell others the good news. Be wise in all your contacts with them.*** We can do that! There are ways we can take those risks and seize those opportunities.

Here's something we can all do this Christmas season. Every day pray and ask God to show you where you can be a difference-maker and then ask Him for the courage to follow through. Haven't you always wanted the chance to do something significant? This is that time! Isn't this the time of year you make a phone call, write a card or send an email to friends and relatives who you don't often connect with? You are going to have numerous opportunities to reach out this Christmas but the question is...will you seize it?

I'm sitting there at the funeral and I'm looking around the room at all of these people and thinking "Look at how God used this one ordinary follower of Jesus Christ to impact so many lives for eternity." I'm blown away by that. Aren't you? Do you realize what this story is all about? "There is nothing Bill did that I couldn't do." There nothing Bill did that you can't do.

We can be tenaciously praying for people or be tenacious in our love for people who are wandering far from God. We cannot give up on them. We can meet people's needs in tangible ways in the name of Jesus Christ. We can be alert to opportunities to encourage a person along the path toward their home in God. We can do these things. You don't need a seminary degree. You don't have to be a superstar. You don't have to be Billy Graham. We can just be ordinary people because we serve an extraordinary God with an extraordinary message.