

THE CROSSWORD

December 2023

A PUBLICATION OF HOLY CROSS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Vol. LXVII, No. 1

THE SURPRISE OF ADVENT

from Pastor Nathan Erb

It came unexpectedly. There was no reason for me to expect something like this to happen, but then it did. I walked into my office one ordinary morning to find a gift on my desk. It wasn't my birthday. It wasn't Christmas. It was a random Tuesday in June. But it had my name on it, so I opened it with curious enthusiasm.

For context, I had recently informed my Long Island congregation that I had accepted a pastoral position in Illinois, and that after much prayer and discussion with my family, we would be moving on to something new. We had been there for 12 years and had made many good friends during that time. But this gift did not come from one of them. In fact, this gift was from someone I had only gotten to know recently. Things being what they are, the gift I had been given from this person didn't seem to fit the standards of gift giving. What I had in my hands was worth around \$350. Perhaps the kind of gift you might receive from someone you have a real bond with, and the value of the gift, represents the value and depth of the friendship. But this was coming from someone I barely

knew. There was a note included with the package, so with confused enthusiasm, I began to read it.

One of the mysteries of how God works is that he can use anything to bring people closer to him. This letter revealed to me that God had done something just like that for this person through something I had said in church months before. I'd like to say it was a great sermon, an entertaining children's message, or a well-crafted newsletter article. But it wasn't. I had spoken off the cuff at a family event we organized at church, but at this particular time, for this particular person, it held great meaning. She went on to tell me that she had been away from church for a long time, with no real expectation of returning. But God spoke through me to her that day, and because of that, she and her family had found a place to belong at church. Out of gratitude for

that - she gave me this gift as a token of her appreciation.

Here's the thing. On that random day in June, I received a gift. But long before the gift arrived on my desk, a few other things had to happen. Working backwards - she had to take time to drive it to the church. Before that, she sat down to write the letter and wrap the gift. Before that, she went and purchased it, using her



hard-earned money. Before that, the thought appeared, and the decision to do something was formed.

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PRESIDENT'S JOURNAL

from Kerry Geffert

Priorities. It's a word to which I have been giving quite a bit of thought lately, both in my personal life and the life of Holy Cross. I'll not bore you with the personal part, but I do want to address the Holy Cross aspect.

If you've been in church, or have read your Holy Cross email, you know that we have financial opportunities ahead of us. Yes, I could say challenges, but let's put a positive spin on this. But first some numbers. Below are a few select balances of our checking account. While Holy Cross does have other funds available through investments, our checking account reflects our week-to-week income and expenses.

October 31, 2022 - \$181,124

(of which \$22,700 was for Share the Hope, so an effective balance of \$158,424)

March 31, 2023 - \$137,408

October 31, 2023 - \$147,398

(of which \$40,500 is specifically earmarked for renovations, so an effective balance of \$106,898)

You see where this is headed:

\$158K → \$137K → \$107K.

I've been asked how this happened. Well, it didn't happen overnight. It has been a gradual decline that did not see the typical rebound following the summer. And I hasten to add that this is not the result of overspending. Your Holy Cross representatives – called, hired, or elected – have been diligently watching expenses. As was seen in the recent Quarterly Update, our expenses have been at, or below, those approved by the congregation last January.

Our issue, quite honestly, is giving. And this brings me back to priorities. For some of our members, Holy Cross is a high priority which is reflected in their first fruits giving. But for many other of our members, furthering the ministry of Holy Cross may not be held as a high priority. They feel less engaged. And that can be reflected in giving.

Completing the circle, this brings us to our financial opportunities. Let's work together to make Holy Cross a higher priority for all of our members by getting more of our members engaged in Holy Cross, whether through worship (we hope through worship!), service, or activities. Engaged people tend to give their community of engagement a higher priority. Engaged people take greater interest in the success of their community. And thus our fruits will multiply!

So what can you do? Pray, of course. And take action. Model engagement. Contact members you haven't seen. Invite them to a service or an event. Let them know their presence is both important and missed.

And then, watch what can happen! ☕

Let's work together to make Holy Cross a higher priority for all of our members by getting more of our members engaged in Holy Cross, whether through worship, service, or activities.



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THE CROSSWORD

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THE SURPRISE OF ADVENT

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My point isn't just to tell you about a surprisingly wonderful gift I received, but that in order for me to receive this gift, a whole lot of thought, planning, and purchasing went into it. All I did was receive the gift, but this person did all the work in advance, without my knowing or even expecting any kind of gesture like this.

Which reminds me of the surprising nature of Advent. When Christ was born in time, it was one day on the calendar. But God has spent thousands of years planning for this moment. And then, suddenly, on one seemingly random day, God sent an angel to Mary to announce that His plan of salvation, which began way back in the days of Eden, would soon come to pass. Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection were all part of the gift God wanted to give to you. It's not something we deserve or have earned, but out of His love, He wanted to make sure you received it. And we have.

We come to discover that, despite what we can see or even imagine, God is continually at work for our benefit. This is encouraging news for us as we are experiencing what appears to us as an uncertain future, especially in regards to our financial situation. But here is the glorious thing: Although we cannot see what tomorrow will bring, God does, and He's working on hearts and minds right now to strengthen His people and bring new people into His grace. While we certainly

must be intentional to be good stewards of the gifts God gives us, we also must continue to be the church and be ready to welcome the people God will bring to Himself through our doors. When they do, should we be surprised, or should we be ready to welcome them with open and loving arms? Perhaps a little of both - but we certainly don't want to be unprepared.

So let's get ready. As 2023 comes to a close and 2024 is knocking on the door, let's be ready for the wonderful surprises God has in store for us. Let us not lose heart when we face struggles, but consider it an opportunity to strengthen our mission and ministry, and with thankful hearts, trust that God is working out all things for our good. ☩

Pastor Nathan Erb

NOTEWORTHY

News, Notes, and Acknowledgements from the Holy Cross Community.

TAG SALE

For quite some time, the idea of an outdoor church tag sale had been batted around and we finally settled on a date. But it rained. Then it rained on our rain date, so we rescheduled again. As our third date approached, and the weather forecasts became more ominous, we decided to move inside, instead of postpone yet again.

And what a great event it was! Visitors were greeted with a friendly hello and the opportunity to purchase baked goods provided by our

members. Then they could turn around and visit the Holy Cross tables filled with items

donated by members and preschool families. On the way to the Fellowship Hall, visitors could quench their thirst at a lemonade table quite ably run by a small group of future entrepreneurs. Finally, once in the Fellowship Hall, 10 vendors offered a little bit of everything.

It was a pleasure to welcome the community to Holy Cross and provide an opportunity to share a bit about ourselves. Many shoppers stopped because of our sign out front, but were pleasantly surprised to find out about Holy Cross. We

even had one shopper who is an alumnus of our preschool from 30-some years ago!

Thanks go to the many hands that helped make the Tag Sale happen – Pat Deloge, Kendra Norman, Jon Halls, Michele & Rick Van Wart, Charlene Hron, Edith Skoog, Mary Ann & Dave Schiller, the Erb, Sylling, & Riccio girls, our vendors and our many bakers.



Financially, more than \$1,000 was raised to support youth activities and building renovation projects. Of that total, our

Bake Sale contributed more than \$375 and the Lemonade Stand made more than \$130. However, just as valuable as the funds raised, was the opening of our doors and the welcome to the community at large. Like the song says, “All around the neighborhood, I’m gonna let it shine!” Keep your eyes open for more opportunities to shine our light within the community!

FOOD DRIVE

Once again our Holy Cross community rose to the challenge to collect at least 500 items in support of the Bridgeport Rescue Mission (BRM). In addition to the contributed items, we had the opportunity to secure an additional \$500 donation for the BRM from the challenge sponsor – the Northeast Region of the Thrivent Member Network. Holy Cross has successfully secured this generous donation from Thrivent in two previous years. The entire program was initiated through a Thrivent Action Team, a community impact program for fundraising and service activities.

The timeframe for this collection was rather short, just a few weeks in October. However, Holy Cross members stepped up immediately! Then Preschool families joined in with significant donations. And lastly, members of Cub Scout Pack 164 added their own contributions to our collection. Assembling, counting and delivering the collection was

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BUILDING BLOCKS

from Holy Cross Christian Preschool

Someone's coming, someone special! December is the special time of Advent followed by the joyous celebration of Christmas! We will be busy in school with many preparations and events that are special to the Christmas holiday. Thanksgiving began the celebration of God's blessings and Christmas confirms His love for us. At preschool we will focus on the birth of our Savior, Jesus! The children will be exploring all aspects of the Christmas story: the angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the wise men and, of course, the birth of baby Jesus in a stable.

We will be learning and singing special songs about the precious Christ Child's birthday. The children are learning that their Redeemer came into the world as a baby but grew up to be a man who died on the cross and rose again for them and the whole world! What a great reason to rejoice!

All the children will participate in our annual Christmas Play. This will be held in our sanctuary at 9

a.m., on Friday, December 22. We all look forward to sharing this special event with the families of the preschool children.

Registration for the 2024-2025 school year will begin on January 22. Please tell your family and friends about our school!

All of us at the preschool would like to wish the congregation a very blessed Christmas and a New Year filled with God's peace, joy and health! ☺

WE'RE ON FACEBOOK!

Check out our school's Facebook page to see pictures and descriptions of all our exciting activities!

www.facebook.com/

[HolyCrossPreschoolTrumbull/](https://www.facebook.com/HolyCrossPreschoolTrumbull/)

FOOD DRIVE (CONTINUED)

made possible with the volunteered time of Kendra Norman, Pat Deloge, Charlene Hron, Sabine Bonnar, and Kerry Geffert.

Our total collection came in at 1,086 items. The BRM processes donations by weight with our donation weighing 1,075 pounds! Even at a conservative estimate of \$1 per item, our collection was likely valued at well over \$1,000! Add to that nine frozen turkeys, weighing 153 pounds, made possible through \$250 in seed money from the Thrivent Action Team program.

And finally, our efforts were successful in securing the additional \$500 donation for the BRM from the Thrivent Member Network.

In less than one month, our Holy Cross community was able to generate a total donation of more than \$1,750 for the Bridgeport Rescue Mission! The true value of this program, however, goes beyond the monetary value. What we showed is how Holy Cross members and friends can come together to meet a need in our greater community in a significant way. Thank you to all who helped us meet this need through your donations!

One Steward's Story

From Bill Flammann, a fellow member of Holy Cross

This is an account of how I was moved from non-giving or perfunctory offerings to the grace and biblical discipline of tithing, that is, giving 10 percent of all income to the ministry of the congregation, plus offerings for other Christian ministries and institutions. But first, some backstory. I was raised in a family that was, through most of my childhood, only occasional attenders in worship. I can't recall any family conversations about giving generously to our church's ministry. If anything, I recall occasional grumbling about how the church was always asking for money. The loss of a restaurant business and occasionally inconsistent patterns of employment meant that there were frequent seasons of financial peril.

In the middle of my high school years, and through the encouragement of my pastor and other congregational members, I began to see that God was leading me to prepare for pastoral ministry. Long-timers here at Holy Cross might remember that I served as seminarian "fieldworker" here through the

1978-1980 school years. Even as a Yale Divinity School seminarian, I remember asking then-pastor, Ron Froehlich, whether pastors were expected to give offerings! Let's just say that I received a very clear response ("Yes!") but then put it out of my mind. In fact, I say with some shame that I gave offerings to neither Holy Cross nor to my home congregation in Queens during my student days.

I came to believe and experience that there is a gracious, mysterious, wonderful divine economy at play when we engage the biblical practice of tithing.

I was married to my beloved Christine in June of 1982. She'd been for four years a teacher at a Lutheran school in Garfield, New Jersey, and we were wed just a few weeks before beginning my post-seminary vicarage/internship. Upon arrival at the congregation, a box of offering envelopes was delivered to "our" parsonage, a church-

owned home that we decorated with hand-me-down furniture and folding chairs borrowed from the church. I said to Christine, "So how

much do you think we should give?” She responded by saying we should list our anticipated weekly income (it wasn’t much), add it up, and move the decimal point to figure the 10 percent amount. This was what she’d learned and practiced since childhood, and she couldn’t imagine doing anything different.

That wasn’t what I was expecting, and I probably gritted my teeth, but then I thought by way of comparison about financial realities, attitudes, and stressors in our two households. Neither of us came from wealth, and each of us experienced great familial love, but the priorities and patterns in the tithing household versus the non-generous household were obvious, so from the start of our marriage, we became tithers.

I came to believe and experience that there is a gracious, mysterious, wonderful divine economy at play when we engage the biblical practice of tithing, first-fruits giving, and generous offerings above and beyond. This is not divine deal making, but I can say that through all of our years together, annual income (until entering retirement) has always gone up, we’ve never paid a penny in interest apart from mortgages and occasional automobile loans, we’ve lived within our means, have enjoyed wonderful excursions, and have never “fought” about money. When God is first, God works to reset the rest of life’s priorities, and His people prosper.

Christine and I retired in 2018 from full-time ministry in the Southeastern District, she as a teacher and I as a pastor in northern Virginia. The District President there who remained the stuff of legend, even after he “termed out” and began serving a large Illinois congregation, was the now sainted Rev. Dr. Charles Mueller. Pastor Mueller was quite the communicator and had lots of memorable statements. Among them was, “I’m still looking for one! I still haven’t found one, but I’ll keep looking to see if I can find a *former tither.*” *His point? Those who take God at His word and practice the grace of tithing come to a place in life where burdens are lighter, generosity comes more easily, and they can’t imagine a different lifestyle.*

If you practice tithing, I invite and encourage you to share your story and your experience with fellow Christians. Join me in inviting and encouraging them to assume the same discipline. I invite any and all who’ve not done so to start now. Commit to three to six months of this grace-filled practice, and see what the reset means in your life and life management (stewardship). I would anticipate that you’ll regret not having started earlier, and it’s highly unlikely that you’ll ever be a *former tither.* ☺

Commitment Chart

One way to approach giving is to decide at the beginning of the year what you will give, and create a plan to help you honor your commitment. Using online giving is a great way to do that.

Use this chart as a starting point in your decision-making process.

Annual Income	3%	5%	8%	10%	12%
\$50,000.00	1,500	2,500	4,000	5,000	6,000
<i>weekly offering</i>	\$29	\$48	\$77	\$96	\$115
\$75,000.00	2,250	3,750	6,000	7,500	9,000
<i>weekly offering</i>	\$43	\$72	\$115	\$144	\$173
\$100,000.00	3,000	5,000	8,000	10,000	12,000
<i>weekly offering</i>	\$58	\$96	\$154	\$192	\$231
\$125,000.00	3,750	6,250	10,000	12,500	15,000
<i>weekly offering</i>	\$72	\$120	\$192	\$240	\$288
\$150,000.00	4,500	7,500	12,000	15,000	18,000
<i>weekly offering</i>	\$87	\$144	\$231	\$288	\$346

C.S. Lewis, Grief, and the Holiday Season

By Gage Jordan (from 1517.org)

As we enter the holiday season, there is so much to be joyful and thankful for this time of year. The weather gets cooler, and all the fun fall activities begin. Things like pumpkin carvings, hayrides, Halloween and more have come and gone. For those that love to hunt, deer season has begun and the smell of turkey and stuffing filled our dining rooms. Christmas is near and we are in Advent, and (soon) Epiphany where we anticipate and remember the story of our Lord entering our world as a baby and coming down to save us. It's a special time for sure. But, for many of us, it can be a time of sorrow and grief. The absence of dear loved ones is ever before us. Thanksgiving used to be one of my favorite holidays. Every year, we would venture over to my grandfather's house and if I close my eyes, I can still see the house filled with food and desserts, decorations everywhere and the warmth of the fireplace hitting my face. But then, one day, the Lord saw fit to take him home. And shortly after my mom and stepdad went to glory as well. And soon those Thanksgivings became pictures and memories instead of joy and excitement.

Recently, I had the opportunity to go to San Diego for the Here We Still Stand national conference for 1517. There were many excellent speakers, but one talk stood out to me and influenced this article. It was Chad Bird's talk on "The Problem of Pain." The theme of the conference was on the life and work of C.S. Lewis. Lewis wrote many influential books including his famous fiction series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But many may not know that Lewis also wrote a couple of outstanding books that can serve as a balm for the souls of those who are grieving this holiday season. Those books are *The Problem of Pain* & *A Grief Observed*. Lewis wrote the second book shortly after losing his wife to cancer. I shared this quote from *The Problem of Pain* last week at the communion table.

"We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world" [1].

The holiday season can feel this way. The silence shouts to us that our friend, husband, wife, parent isn't around. Yet, Lewis sits with us in those moments and has some wisdom.

"God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't. In his trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew my temple was a house of cards. His only way to make me realize the fact was to knock it down...I need Christ, not something that resembles Him" [2].

And there it is in that last line. "I need Christ, not something that resembles Him." Our only hope in life and death is that we are not our own. We aren't on our own...even in this season. We have Jesus. We are kept. Even when we can't keep ourselves. So, know dear brother and sister, that you are loved this holiday season. And you're not forgotten. In fact, God has given you His Church, an extended heavenly family on earth to come beside you and make new holiday memories with. Let's come around each other this season and be the family we are missing.

This article can be found at www.1517.org/articles/cs-lewis-grief-and-the-holiday-season

[1] (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, pg. 91)

[2] (C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, pg.52 & 65)

Celebrating this Month

DECEMBER

It's fun to be recognized on your special day! Even more so, it's special to know others are praying for you. It is our hope that as you spend time in daily prayer, you will remember your fellow Holy Cross members on their special day.

BIRTHDAYS

Date Name

2	Riley Riccio
3	Audrey Paray
4	Olivia Fanning
5	Christy Halls
7	Jim Finch
8	Patsy Cerone, Jr.
8	Roberta Crocker
10	Joanne Bogen
10	Zachary Wendling
11	Joan Curto
12	Cole Dowling
12	Jordan Matthews
13	Sarah Bogen
23	Elijah Adomako-Ayisi
27	Manfred Schlaich
29	Jenevieve Torres
31	Effie Solaz

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

Date Name

1	David & Michelle Festi
6	Gary & Kristen Messerschmitt
21	Gunther & Ursula Naumann
29	David & Mary Ann Schiller

BAPTISM BIRTHDAYS

Julia Antoniou
Michael Antoniou
Mathew Benson
Timothy Benson Sr.
Kevin Conte
Harald Dale
Jacqueline Dale
Cole Dowling
Greg Dowling
Jared Ely
Heather Fanning
Savannah Fitzmorris
Ethan Gagliardi
Jake Hackney
Stella Hackney
Sophie Martineli
Christine Matthews
Jessica Nyitrai
Luke Schipul
Camila Smith
Penelope Smith
Caroline Sylling

If there is someone that should be on one of these lists, but isn't...please alert the office so we can update our records!