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Christmas is such a wonderful time of year. Carols, cookies, decorated trees, hot chocolate on chilly nights, present opening, all conjure childhood memories of a calmer time. Of course, it was calmer only because my parents did the work, but I didn't know that. But that is all just window dressing on the truly important thing: Christmas is Jesus' birthday. And it is a window dressing that is not distributed evenly to all people. Christmas has a side that receives little media attention beyond token fluff pieces that tend to be more about the goodness of who is providing gifts or dinners than they are about the humanity of the people being served. That side of the holidays includes families with a member in prison, or overseas in the military, Peace Corps, or doing missionary work; those in hospitals or nursing homes; those in mourning; those who are alone. It includes families who cannot afford presents; those who have nothing to cook a feast or no warm home to serve it in; and those who live with the threat of war on the birthday of the Prince of Peace. Some of those people live in Eau Claire and many of them are in our church pews and classrooms.

The USDA just released a telling report on food insecurity in the United States (<http://ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR66/ERR66.pdf>). It shows that about 691,000 children went hungry in 2007, more than 50 percent more than in 2006. Almost one in eight Americans struggled to feed themselves, and over 12 percent cannot afford enough food for active, healthy lives. The number of hungry adults and children rose over 40 percent since 2000. As our economic woes increase, those numbers will increase. Beyond these numbers, I imagine the number of people suffering acute financial anxiety is even higher.

Christmas is a good time to remember those with less by praying and acting for change. My family have more than we need, so we decided not to exchange gifts this year. Instead, I will give to St. Francis Food Pantry, Heifer Project International, and other organizations. One church I know asked its members last year to donate money equal to what they spent on gifts. They raised thousands to help the needy and organizations fighting to eliminate the injustices that create poverty. But more importantly, the members discovered the spiritual freedom of stepping out of the rat race by buying less, and giving more where it mattered.

A movement started a few years ago called Advent Conspiracy (adventconspiracy.org) which is a movement away from debt-based consumption into worshiping Christ more meaningfully through giving presence, instead of presents (giving our time, or hand-made gifts), and giving to those in need (for example, Americans spend \$450 billion on Christmas gifts; for only \$10 billion, we could provide clean water to every person in the world). Without in any way diminishing the real financial suffering happening, perhaps a blessing is to be had this year. By focusing less on the next great purchase or who can spend the most on parties and feasts, we might find ourselves appreciating more what is already in front of us: our families and friends. We Christians might even find more Jesus. Perhaps we'll wake up after Christmas more rested and spiritually fulfilled, like those calmer days of childhood, instead of financially and spiritually wiped out. I don't know. But I'm giving it a try this year, and so far it feels less stressful, more

wonderful, and more holy. I pray that you, too, will find holiness this Christmas.