

In the church today we have begun the season of Advent. This is the season when we set aside 4 weeks to prepare for the birth of the Christ child. We decorate the sanctuary. We set up and light candles on the Advent wreath. We try our best to remind ourselves what this season is really all about. The acts we do in the sanctuary are pretty counter cultural to what is out there beyond us.

Because let's be honest with ourselves. The dominant culture we live in does not say that this is a season of waiting and expectation. How much waiting and expectation was preached in the circulars this past weekend? Did you hear anything about waiting this weekend? Far from it. This weekend began the season of wanting things now.

This past Friday was what was called Black Friday here in the US. This day is like no other day in this country. From what I can tell, this is the only day that advertisers try to outdo one another in how early they can open up their stores. Doors open at 5 am. Our doors open at 4 am. Our doors open at midnight and have specials throughout the day. Go to our website and download a lay out of the store and the specials that are out there today. For those of us in the retail business, Black Friday is the beginning of a very hectic season of long hours and busy days.

Black Friday has come to mean a day when places offer items for discounted prices. It is the day we are told we are to focus on getting the best deal for our money. Lots of places try to capitalize on this marketing catch phrase to try to get us to do or purchase something that we would not ordinarily do or buy.

Black Friday begins a season when our focus changes. Some of us see the time around Thanksgiving as a time for some type of hunting experience. Others of us see this as the busiest time of the year for the retail business and our profit margin is made or lost in the next few weeks. Others of us see this as a time when watching certain sports like football becomes more intense. Others of us are worried about whether or not we can afford the presents we want to purchase.

Others of us see this as a time to try to figure out which parties we are going to host or attend. For some of us, this is a time to become focused on doing something of significance for someone else. For good or bad, our focus changes after Black Friday.

Is that good or bad? Is our changed focus good or bad? Well that is when we can allow Paul's words to the church in Rome to help us out. Paul is writing to this group of Christians about how they are to live their lives in the midst of a dominant culture which is not Christian. Paul is a Roman citizen and he writes to his fellow Christians in Rome a letter about how to be a Christian within the larger culture that has a different agenda than following Christ.

Paul simply says this. The way we live our life does matter. It matters the way you and I handle ourselves and it matters how you and I treat other people. It matters what you and I do in front of others. It matters what you and I do when no one is watching.

Let's look at Paul's advice as advice to anyone who is seeking to follow the ways of Christ in a Black Friday culture. In this section, Paul says to not run up debts. Great advice to our family since we just refinanced our house, reminding us of the biggest debt that we carry. Great advice as many of us used our credit card a large amount over the past couple of days. I guess it would be rather hypocritical if I said anything about Paul's speaking out against carrying of debt.

But he does say it. He does give advice that debt is not a good thing. It restricts us. Debt binds us. Debt makes us a slave to someone else. Many of us are feeling the stress of a debt that we used to be able to cover but now we feel we are overwhelmed by our debt. So during a Black Friday season these words about the dangers of debt are words that challenge us. And again, I speak for myself because I carry debt like anyone else. Our future financial decisions are based on the amount of debt that we owe as a family. The reason we refinanced is to lower our debt. And we all pretty much know about how much debt our country is carrying and how that impacts what we are able to do as a country.

So what else does Paul address in the section that we read today. Paul also says to be faithful in our relationships. I saw where one pastor has told his congregation that they should no longer use social networking sites like Facebook because it leads to breakups in relationships. I'm not sure I would go as far as he has gone but technology, social media, texting, and other tools can be used to support or break up relationships.

This advice leads into the overall point that Paul makes. Don't always be wanting what others have. This statement pretty much sums up everything in this text of Scripture. Because debts and affairs can basically be the same thing. They are all about wanting something which is not ours to have. During this Black Friday season we are to not be focused on what we don't have. We are, according to Paul, to be focused on giving away what we do have.

And what do we have to give away? According to Paul, what we have to give away is love to our neighbor. Our focus is not on seeking what we don't have. Our focus is to be on what we do have that we can give away. And what we have to give away freely this Black Friday season is love.

I want to share a story. This is the story about the name that is painted on the court of USC's basketball arena. Not the University of South Carolina's court but the University of Southern California's court. I know I used a sports analogy last week but I hope you will bear with me on this story if you are not a sports fan.

The name on the basketball court is in giant cardinal letters, the signature on USC's signature new arena. It will be stepped upon by generations of USC Trojans basketball players. It will be seen by millions of fans. Yet it is cloaked in mystery.

Jim Sterkel Court.

Jim Sterkel was a former Trojan who played only two seasons in the mid-1950s. He never averaged more than 10 points a game. His teams never won more than 16 games. He never graduated.

Jim Sterkel Court.

He spent a lifetime working as a Johnson Wax salesman. He died of cancer in 1997. He left behind a wife of 38 years and three children and a modest home. Outside that home today there hangs a college banner. A UCLA banner. He wasn't a USC Trojans donor, he never had Trojans season tickets.

Jim Sterkel Court.

A most amazing story in the city of Los Angeles, a city of stars and glitz.

The story is a story of two friends. One likes to play sports, the other likes to watch sports, and together they become as one, chasing fun and fear and dreams. They attend separate junior colleges, but remain close. When they both enroll in USC in the fall of 1955, they become roommates.

One is a 6-foot-7, 230-pound center named Jim Sterkel. The other chooses to remain Anonymous. Anonymous was the businessman, Sterkel was the jock, and it was through sports that Anonymous best understood his friend.

"Jim came home from a game at one time with two black eyes," Anonymous said. "It took him a while to admit that he had taken just two shots, and that Bill Russell had blocked both of them right back in his face." It was then that Anonymous realized Sterkel's honesty and lack of ego, something his teammates already knew.

After scoring all of nine baskets in his junior year, Sterkel was voted the team's most improved player in his senior year, averaging 9 points and 8 rebounds. "He was never a great player," said Anonymous. "But he was the kind that kept showing up."

After their senior years, the roommates set upon vastly different courses of life, but never strayed too far. Anonymous became a business tycoon, while Sterkel became a suburban salesman and church leader, yet they still met for family dinners, fishing trips and pep talks on the phone. Sterkel was the kind of guy who didn't smoke, didn't swear, and would lead his church in services and on its basketball courts.

He was the kind of guy neighbors phoned if they needed a television fixed or pipe unclogged. Giant and bespectacled and always smiling, he was the kind of guy who hugged everyone.

Anonymous was the kind of guy who, while leading a faster-paced life, gained strength from Sterkel's daily consistency. "It's hard to find friends who last a lifetime," Anonymous recalled. "For me, Jim was that guy." When Sterkel retired from Johnson Wax, Anonymous hired him for a job at his company.

When Sterkel first noticed a lump in his testicles, he told Anonymous, who immediately drove him to the doctor for the beginning of his long and fatal relationship with cancer. While Sterkel was dying, Anonymous' young son also contracted cancer. Sterkel wrote Anonymous a poem, sealed it, and ordered it only to be read if Anonymous' son died.

Less than two years after Sterkel's death, Anonymous' son died of leukemia. He unsealed and read the poem. He said he still feels its imprint today.

"I'll never forget that he took the time out of his own life during his final days to do this for me, to try to inspire my life even when he was losing his own life," Anonymous said.

It was this inspiration that Anonymous remembered when he was approached by USC with an offer to make a donation to put his name on the new court. He could have given the school his son's name. Most people would have given their own name.

Instead, he wrote a check for \$5 million and gave the name of Jim Sterkel.

"Some people don't deserve to be forgotten," Anonymous said. "Maybe this will keep him around a little longer." Anonymous had only one request, that the donation be forever nameless.

"So what exactly did Jim Sterkel do to warrant this incredible honor?" Anonymous was asked by a reporter who figured out who he was. Did he give a kidney? Did he pull you out of a burning car?"

Anonymous sighed.

"He did much more than that. He was my friend."

Upon hearing the news, Jim Sterkel's daughter shared this about her father, "He was such a good husband, such a good man, but do people really notice those things anymore?"

There is talk in some USC circles that the naming of the court should not have been sold, but rather given to a former Trojans basketball hero. After all, John Wooden's name is on the UCLA court, and Coach K's name is on Duke's court.

But to this Anonymous says, "If you have a friend for 50 years, isn't that big enough?"

Maybe in a Black Friday world there is room to celebrate Advent. Amen.

-Plaschke, Bill, "Floored," originally published in LA Times and found at <http://www.usc.edu/uscnnews/stories/13228.html>

-Text: Romans 13: 8-14

-Given: Nov. 28, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)