JUSTICE FOR ALL

Collection

Devotionals for Advent

by Steve Wagner

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"Let Me Send Him My Crutch."

A Cripple Gives a Christmas Lesson

Note: Some of you haven't heard from me in months or years. Please accept this Christmas letter for my work at Justice For All as my attempt to begin to reconnect. Let me know how you're doing, your updated contact information, how I can pray for you: www.hbmm.net, www.facebook.com/steve.wagner. – Your friend, Stephen

Dear Friend,

It's a tradition. Every Advent, my mother lovingly places the needle of the record player on a vinyl copy of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Whenever I was home for Christmas, we listened…sometimes more than once. Even for a boy who didn't care much for classical music, I was always enchanted by *Amahl*. Now, I make a point each Advent to listen to the opera with my family.

The opera is rich with comment on everyday human problems. There are precious mother-son interactions about lying and childhood optimism. The plot illustrates the disparity between rich and poor as well as the thorny ethical problem of attempting to justify the *bad means* of stealing with the *good end* of feeding one's child. Perhaps most interesting, the opera comments on Christ's humanness in the incarnation through Amahl and his mother, a pair with striking similarities to Christ and his mother, Mary.

The day was Christmas Eve, 1951. Five million television viewers tuned in to watch this first opera written for television. According to Wikipedia, it was the largest audience to ever watch an opera. Although I missed the premiere, my family regularly "tuned in" to the vinyl record each Advent when I was growing up. My wife and daughters and I will be listening this week.

The basic story is this: A first-century crippled boy named Amahl and his mother are dirt-poor and are contemplating the prospect of leaving home to go begging. Three kings on their way to Bethlehem take lodging with Amahl and his mother. As the kings sleep, the mother sings a moving aria about the rich, "Do They Know?" and takes some of the gold from one of the kings. After she is caught in the act, the kings describe how the King they are seeking (Jesus) doesn't need the gift of the gold. They forgive the mother and offer her the gold. But she has a change of heart.

> ***Mother:*** Oh no…wait…take back your gold. For such a king, I've waited all my life. And if I weren't so poor, I would send a gift of my own to such a child.
>
> ***Amahl:*** But Mother, let me send him my crutch. Who knows, he may need one. And this I made myself.
>
> ***Mother:*** But that, you can't, you can't.

And then…well, I won't give away the dramatic climax of the story.

As we approach Christmas, I am reflecting on Amahl's willingness to give Jesus his dearest, most useful possession, imperfect and commonplace as it was. I think of similar gifts I bring to Jesus each day.

One of those gifts is my investment of *time* in our staff here at JFA. It's imperfect and it doesn't compare to the gift Christ has given us (His life), but it's my dearest possession. Helping our staff grow as trainers, speakers, and mentors means "being present" when they're hard at work during our seat work (seminar) and feet work (outreach). I give feedback, and when a mentor is stuck, I step in to model how to answer a tough question so that it doesn't sidetrack the group. This "training certification" program is the

best gift I can present to our staff…and it's the best gift I can present to Jesus. It's your partnership that makes it possible. Thank you.

As we approach Christmas, I'd like to share a short, year-end summary of how things are going with my JFA work, my support raising, and the Wagner family. Some of these items represent the time investment I've just described. Some represent other gifts I bring to Jesus.

- **Half-Way There –** Thirteen JFA trainers were busy learning to teach portions of our five-hour "Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue" seminar in 2010. Our initial goal is eight trainers certified to teach the entire seminar. I believe we'll reach it by June 2011. We're almost to four at present.

- **Thousands Impacted –** In 2010…
    - JFA trained 1,357 people in 34 seminars across the country. 41% of these people (563) completed the essential "feet work" component of their training by having conversations with pro-choice advocates during our outreach events (thirteen campuses in nine states).
    - I coordinated the team of 23 people who mentored our volunteers through these events.
    - 3,180 people also heard one of JFA's 38 presentations. I gave special presentations at Wheaton College and the South Dakota Right to Life convention.

- **New Materials –** I spearheaded a complete revision of our training manual, now called, *Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue – The Interactive Guide* and the first edition of JFA's new *Guide For Trainers*. These materials animate the entire JFA program. Our staff mentor team, non-staff mentors, and a partner organization (Right to Life of Central California) use them to train others to create abortion dialogue that changes minds, heals hearts, and saves lives.

- **Free eBook Coming Soon –** I am preparing to offer an eBook version of *Common Ground Without Compromise* for free beginning next month. I'll tell you more in my January 1 newsletter.

- **Time for Support-Raising –** My strong support team continues to be generous and faithful. I am so encouraged. I'll be spending much of the first part of 2011 raising the remainder of my support, which has been at about 66% since I began at JFA. I'm excited to finally be able to contact new supporters.

Whether it's one of JFA's mentors or volunteers, one of you who supports my work, my wife, or one of my children, I want to invest in each person by *taking time* – time to listen, look each person in the eyes, think together about a problem, pray for miracles, or…to simply be "present." That's how I would treat Jesus if He were physically present. I encourage you to give the same gift this Christmas.

Thank you for your concern for me and my work at JFA. Would you take a moment to consider giving a year-end gift to JFA to help me in that work? To give a gift or make a commitment to give in 2011, click this link: http://stephenmwagner.blogspot.com/p/support.html.

Merry Christmas!

Stephen

See Steve's blog (www.stephenmwagner.com) for articles, calendar, and links.

Messing with the Pageant

Is Imogene Worth It?

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

CHRISTMAS 2011

Dear Friend,

I don't think my daughters knew it, but I was shaking. I couldn't stop crying.

We were sitting at their first play, courtesy of their grandparents, a kid's version of "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever."

The story is unforgettable. Grace Bradley, a mother of two, reluctantly takes on the church Christmas pageant after the usual director gets injured. The Herdmans, a family of six fatherless children famous in the neighborhood for many villainous acts, strong-arm their way into the pageant by threatening the other kids. When it comes time to dole out the main roles, they're the only ones who volunteer.

Then the Herdmans bring their cigars, fighting, cussing, and ignorance of the Christmas story to every rehearsal, including the disastrous dress rehearsal.

On the night of the pageant, Grace's daughter Beth reflects on the sight of Imogene and Ralph Herdman entering the church as Mary and Joseph.

> *I guess we would have gone on humming till we all turned blue, but we didn't have to. Ralph and Imogene were there all right, only for once they didn't come through the door pushing each other out of the way. They just stood there for a minute as if they weren't sure they were in the right place – because of the candles, I guess, and the church being full of people. They looked like the people you see on the six o'clock news – refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with all their boxes and sacks around them.*
>
> *It suddenly occurred to me that this was just the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn't care much what happened to them. They couldn't have been very neat and tidy either, but more like this Mary and Joseph (Imogene's veil was cockeyed as usual, and Ralph's hair stuck out around his ears). Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn't carrying it the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had slung it over her shoulder, and before she put it in the manger she thumped it twice on the back. (Barbara Robinson, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Harper Trophy, 2005, p. 97)*

I've been exploring why this moment is so moving to me. I suppose it's this: Christ came for the poor, unrefined, awkward, commonplace people like Ralph and Imogene Herdman. He was so zealous for them that he became one of them. And while we should be extending that same love to the Herdmans, our tendency is to shun them as kids messing up the pageant. We're exposed for what we are: people who care more about our pageants than people. In truth we're unrefined, awkward, and poor just like Imogene and Ralph, standing there "not sure if we're in the right place." But somehow, in our beat-up tennis shoes and funky hair, we are acceptable.

Let's look at this pageant story as a sort of metaphor for our Christian subculture with all of its parties, potlucks, Christmas Eve services, and caroling. Like the many parishioners who criticized Grace for including the Herdmans, it's easy for us to see these events as ends in themselves, cherished experiences we protect at all costs.

Which is more important—the purity of the subculture or the souls of the Herdmans? Even if we get the answer right, how often do we go out purposefully to find the "Herdmans" near us?

In a sense, the Herdmans made it easy for the people at church to find them. They walked in the front door. Sure, it was because they thought heaps of free donuts and ice cream awaited them. And yes, a few *will* come to our churches if we offer them sugar, children's programs, and other items of practical value. *But most will not*. Let me introduce a few of them.

In the course of two days at the University of North Texas (UNT) last month, I spoke with a lesbian named Taylor, a communist named Collin, a post-abortive pregnant mother of an elementary schooler named Jennifer, a jeering progressive named Adam who expressed a longing for community, and a young man

named Jimmy who regularly attends Catholic Mass but doesn't think one can give evidence that God exists.

Sure, some of our church folk will be so bold as to reach out to people like these on their own. You won't be able to stop them. But for most, they don't know how to start.

Enter JFA. Sure, we begin in the safety of a church with groups mostly made up of churched people for a five-hour seminar. But then we invite those seminar participants to campus where they come face to face with the Herdmans. And they learn to set aside the Herdmans' cigars, pompous hatred of God, cussing, and skepticism so that some might be saved – so that the Imogenes of the world might draw close to God.

Twenty-six homeschooled students and parents recently joined us to try this out. Their pro-life camp included outreach to UNT. Let me introduce one of them to you through her own words:

I recently attended a Justice For All mission trip, and it changed my life…I am a home-schooled teenager, I am fifteen years old, and I've been blessed with five younger brothers and sisters. Engaging the students on that university campus, for me, was like engaging people from another culture…I talked to students who thought they were no more valuable than cows and squirrels and cockroaches…This trip was one of my first opportunities to discuss deep issues with people who completely disagreed with me…

"I talked to students who thought they were no more valuable than cows and squirrels and cockroaches."

One of my favorite experiences was my very last conversation for the entire mission trip. This climactic conversation answered my prayers from months before, when I had prayed that the students' hearts would be open to the Truth and that I could share my faith. I joined a conversation between three college students and my friend Kinsie, another JFA volunteer. We talked for an hour, first concerning abortion which led into the value of life and Christianity. Finally, one of the girls said, "You two seem very strong and grounded in everything you believe. None of us agree with each other, and yet here we are having a reasonable conversation. Not one of us has raised her voice once since we started conversing half an hour ago, unlike those protesters over there [the pro-choice people who chanted and yelled at JFA]. We have known Christians who yell at us and get in our face when we say we're not Christians, but you're not like that; you really seem to care about us. I'm Tyler; can I give you a hug?" The love of Christ breaks down all barriers! … Wow! …

I had always understood—and been passionate about—missions in third-world countries, but I had never understood how to spread the gospel in America. This experience put a face on missions in the United States, and how to share my faith and my beliefs…The JFA mission trip was an experience of a lifetime…I am highly looking forward to my next mission trip with JFA. – Jasmin

Jasmin stepped into Tyler's world to find *her* in much the same way that Christ stepped into our world to find *us*. And now Jasmin can't wait to do it again.

Thank you for supporting my work with Justice For All this year. It's such a joy for me to partner with you so that students like Jasmin can turn the "pageant" inside out and take its message to those who need it most. Let's look for opportunities to do the same this Christmas!

Warmly,

Stephen

Support Update: Where in the World Are We?

In our last letter, I mentioned that we were putting ourselves on the road in Texas to raise support. We've now been on the road about eight weeks. Even though the support-raising process is going more slowly than I had hoped, I'm very encouraged. I've been able to meet with individuals, churches, and small groups. I'm finally able to take the time to discuss my work with potential supporters and cultivate the relationships that are the foundation of long-term support. Rebeccah and I and the kids will return to Kansas in mid December. We'll continue working on our support until it's finished…just not from Texas. Thanks for standing with us and praying for us. I'm posting regular "Reveal the Mystery Picture" support updates at www.hbmm.net, so take a look and see how God is providing.

Thank you for partnering with me to change minds, heal hearts, and save lives! Merry Christmas!

Presence

The Best Presents Don't Come in Packages

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

DECEMBER 19, 2012

Dear Friend,

At Cameron University earlier this year, a nervous young woman approached me and asked about our outreach. One of our more experienced volunteers named Natalie was standing nearby, so I said, "Natalie will be happy to talk with you." I walked away to motivate other volunteers to get into conversations.

Not more than 30 seconds later, Natalie was shaking my arm. "Steve, she said she was raped. I don't know what to say." We went back to the young woman, who was now bent over the "YES" side of the "Should Abortion Remain Legal?" poll table.

Without letting on that Natalie had shared some of the previous conversation with me, I asked the young woman a question. Very forthrightly, she said, "I was raped, so I definitely think abortion should stay legal."

At this point, I had a choice to make. I could focus on her view that rape justifies abortion, or I could focus on her. I chose the latter, and for the next 45 minutes Natalie and I spent the majority of our time gently asking questions to give this woman the chance to feel heard. At a bar in her college town, she had been followed into the bathroom and assaulted. As her story unfolded, it became clear that she had a big decision before her. Months after the incident, she still had not reported it to the police. She was concerned that another young woman might also become this man's victim if she remained silent.

It took all of my energy to decide which question would be most helpful at each point in this conversation. This dear woman had isolated herself from her friends, and she seemed to feel very alone. I didn't want to pry, but I knew that Natalie and I might be two of the only people to listen to this young woman without judgment.

Natalie gave the woman her contact information, and we promised to help in any way we could, including helping her go to the police. Unfortunately, we haven't heard from her since.

Although this conversation didn't have a happy ending, it's a good illustration of a principle we value and teach at JFA: *Be present to the person* in every interaction. This means setting aside every distraction, including the points I want to make in the conversation, in order to devote the whole of my mental focus to the person.

During this season of advent, I'm especially reminded of another type of *being present*: Christ decided to be

1. Univ. North Texas, Denton, TX (November)

2. Oklahoma City, OK (July)

3. Fresno City College, Fresno, CA (April)

Whether I'm (1) interacting on open mic, (2) mentoring volunteers in a training seminar, or (3) creating an ad hoc exhibit for a conversation on campus, ***being present*** means setting aside every distraction in order to devote the whole of my mental focus to the person. (Picture 3 shows fellow JFA staff member Jacob Burow, left, and volunteers helping me.)

present among us in his incarnation. Philippians 2:5-7 says,

> *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.*

Christ emptied himself, or set aside his privileges, to become present to us. We can have a similar attitude, setting aside our agenda and our needs to become present to the person right in front of us.

At an Oklahoma workshop in October, I helped Natalie (left) and fellow students Carson and Jasmin learn to take leadership in the JFA training program.

Many distractions can get in the way. Cell phones and computers are obvious culprits, but because they are physical objects the remedy for their distraction is fairly straightforward. I sequester them to one room when I'm at home, and I shut them off or ignore them when on campus. Still, even when these are safely out of reach, a more mundane and insidious menace threatens to distract me: *my own thinking*.

During conversations with students on campus, I find myself distracted by trying to hold in my mind a point I want to make, by wondering what the person is thinking of me, and by feeling guilt over arguments I didn't master that might have been the key for this person. Even the goal of changing the person's mind can be a distraction. No matter how important some of these are, I set aside all of them to focus on the person standing in front of me.

Setting aside mental distractions is difficult enough with strangers, but for some of us, it's almost impossible with family. You have heard it said, "Familiarity breeds contempt." I don't hate the people in my family the more I'm with them, but too often I take for granted the small moments that make up a day or a week or a year.

For some of us, it is almost impossible to be present to the members of our own family.

My daughter Nora shows me how she learned to button her jacket, but I am distracted by making myself a snack, and I miss the moment when she completes the task and looks up at me for approval. I walk through the door, and Elsie assails me with an elaborate tale of the exploits of some just-married young woman she is pretending to be, but my mind is muddled with unsolved challenges from work. How easy is it for me, sitting in the kitchen just ten feet away, to hear my wife begin to speak but not attend to her words?

Would you join me this Christmas in practicing the virtue of being present to the family members around us? If we can master this skill with the people we love, then being present to the strangers God sends our way will be even easier. *Being present* is certainly the best present we can give.

Thank you for partnering with me and my family this year as I have emphasized the importance of this skill and have modeled it during conversations like the one Natalie and I had with the young woman at Cameron University. You have *been present* in still another way in each of these conversations: You've made them possible through your financial gifts and prayers. Thank you.

Merry Christmas,

Stephen

P.S. See my posts at www.hbmm.net (December 19, 2012) for practical tips on being present during Christmas and throughout the New Year.

Yes! Your year-end gifts are tax-deductible!
Use the enclosed coupon or www.jfaweb.org/Donate to support my work with Justice For All today!

Tech-Getherness?

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

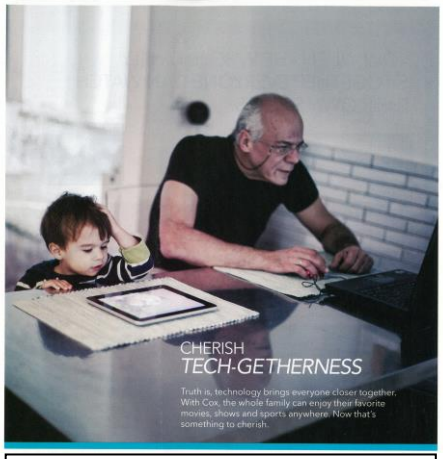
CHRISTMAS 2013

"Let Christ himself be your example as to what your attitude should be.
For he, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal,
but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man."
Phil. 2:5-7 (Phillips)

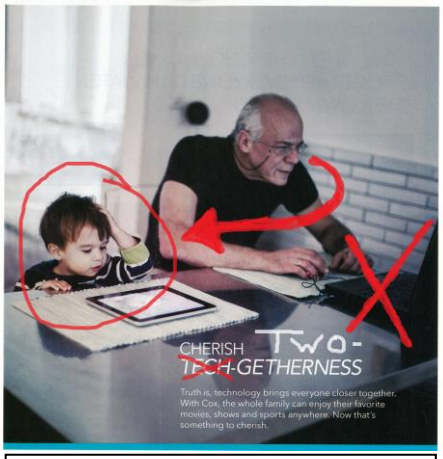
Dear Friend,

Tech-Getherness? Imagine the Tech-Carnation. The angels announce the amazing visitation to the shepherds. The Messiah is here. The shepherds come running. They find the stable, the feeding trough, Mary, Joseph, and…and a 96-inch flat screen monitor with a YouTube video playing. Oooh's and Ahhh's ooze from the gathered crowd. Somebody says that one man on the screen conversing dramatically with his back turned to the camera is the Messiah. The camera zooms in for a close up so that a tear on his cheek is visible beneath an understanding eye.

Why didn't Jesus come as a YouTube video clip? Couldn't our 21st century technological marvels have helped spread the news of his coming more efficiently? According to my local cable provider, the computer devices which once seemed like a distraction are actually tools for securing relationship. One ad reads "Cherish Tech-Getherness" and shows a grandfather and grandson sitting side by side with a laptop and iPad enjoying some "quality" time.



Original Advertisement



Ah. That's better.

Imagine that Christ had taken the same approach and decided it was "good enough" to come in the form of a video image on your favorite device. Or, imagine he had used the apology we sometimes use for our distracted countenance: it's the "best I can do" to be half here and half-hearing.

How priceless a gift that Christ instead gave everything of Himself, both in setting aside His privileges to take on a human nature and in giving Himself on the cross to redeem us (see Phil. 2:3-11, esp. 7). His was no *tech-carnation*. No half-hearted, half-connected version of love. There's a reason Jesus came in the flesh.

I pray that in the coming year God will help me to be like His Son at least in this regard: tune out YouTube and every other "tech-gether" opportunity and tune in – in to the people in my neighborhood and on campus who need to see Christ in their midst. I trust Christ will take my willingness and use it to draw some to Himself. Will you join me?

Merry Christmas,

Stephen

Stephen Wagner

JUSTICE FOR ALL TRAINS THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME.
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A Tale of Two Gifts

JFA Executive Director's Monthly Letter

Christmas 2014

Dear Friend,

This is a tale of two true stories, two gifts, and the power of saying "thank you."

Oklahoma, 2014 A.D.

At a JFA poll table this fall, a volunteer ("Adam") and a young woman were discussing reasons she thought abortion should be legal, including differences between the unborn and the rest of us.

After a few minutes, the woman said, "My aunt died due to a complication of pregnancy, and that was in America, in Chicago. If she would have gotten an abortion, she would still be here." Tears appeared around the edges of her eyes.

"You were saying earlier," Adam replied, "that you think the unborn is not valuable because it is dependent? Do you realize that newborns…"

She started to edge away from the table, looking towards her friend with a glance that said, "Let's go." Adam asked another question about the arguments regarding dependency and the value of the unborn.

She took a step closer to respond, but seeing her friend ready to leave, she stepped back. With more than a hint of sarcasm, she said, "Thank you for being so understanding. You're *so* kind."

She was gone. Adam turned to me and began replaying the arguments about the unborn, what he thought she had meant, and what he thought he could have said differently. "I could have brought up…"

Palestine, circa 30 A.D.

One of the Pharisees asked [Jesus] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

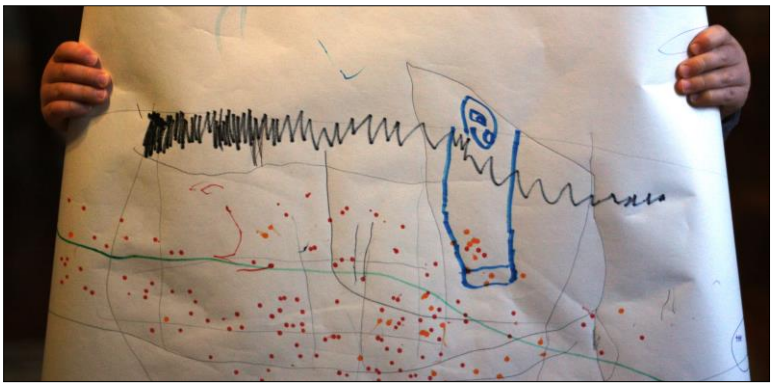
Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50, ESV)

Saying Thank You, With and Without Words

Back in Oklahoma, I tried to follow Adam's train of thought, but an elephant was looming so large in the room that I wasn't able to focus on what he was saying. I waited for a good space into which to speak. "I think you may be right about what she meant," I said, and then added mysteriously, "but I think you missed something…" He stared back at me with an uncomprehending look.

I walked around to the side of the table where the woman had been standing. "It's as if she was taking something very precious to her, a part of herself, and offering it to you." I drew my hands together, holding them up toward him with an imaginary gift. "You didn't accept her gift."



Here's another way to put the point: If my son proudly brings me a page filled with a mess of scribbles, I could brush it aside as a worthless piece of paper, but instead, I hold it in my hands, and I'm excited about it. I thank my son in this way because of *his* value, and the value of *his giving of the gift*.

Looking in on the interaction between Adam and the woman, we are tempted to say, "How could he have missed that?" She said that her aunt died. She *died*. The woman's tears were obvious. What's more, the response that might have transformed the interaction was tragically simple:

Wow. I'm not sure what to say. That is so hard.
Would you be willing to tell me a bit about what your aunt meant to you?

Let's return to Jesus' interaction with the woman who shed tears all over his feet. Instead of focusing on her sin (as Simon had been) or the "waste" of expensive ointment (as Judas had done in a similar situation), Jesus simply received her gift and, with his actions, said a simple "thank you." Then he used that foundation to move forward in addressing the woman's need for the truth about himself and her need for forgiveness.

This beautiful action turns the situation on its head. Jesus had given this woman the gift of the presence of the Son of God through his incarnation, and then the gift of forgiveness. Yet he thanks her for *her* gift, however it might have paled in comparison. In the same way, when a person takes the time and effort to share with us, we can temporarily set to the side our agenda of changing a mind. We listen, reflecting on the gift we are being given, saying "thank you" without words. From this foundation then, we are better able to help a person correct a crippling falsehood or accept transforming forgiveness.

As I'm considering the importance of saying "thank you" for the gifts people offer to us in conversations, I'm mindful that many of my readers have given JFA a different sort of gift: a financial gift to help us train pro-life advocates like Adam. It seems fitting to end this letter and this year by saying "thank you." Thank you for investing in JFA volunteers like Adam. Your financial and prayer support is helping them learn unforgettable lessons of imitating Christ's love for each person. We are awed by God's provision and by your partnership in our work. Thank you.

In His Service,

Steve Wagner
Executive Director, JFA

Read More on the Topic of this Letter: www.jfaweb.org/Dec-2014-Extras

You Can Still Give a Year-End Gift: www.jfaweb.org/Donate

Conversations

STORIES, REFLECTIONS, & DIALOGUE TIPS FROM THE JUSTICE FOR ALL TEAM

Christmas 2015

Executive Letter and Ministry Notes: **Steve Wagner**

"This seminar reminded me that I must remember that I am talking to people…" – Kaitlyn, 2015 seminar participant

A Person Is a Wonder

Dear Friend,

My kids and I participated in a live nativity a few weeks ago. We donned the garb of shepherds and angels and walked towards a rustic stable where actors from local churches were waiting with live goats and sheep to take a photo with us.

I was the last to enter the stable, a poor shepherd. As the crew helped my kids find a place where they could be seen by the camera, I looked around. It was fun to be standing next to three wise men in robes and crowns. As the photographer got ready to take the shot, he asked us to look at him. Instead of following directions, I did the only thing that made sense to me at that moment, I looked down at the baby Jesus (in this case a doll) and my mouth hung open, my eyes bright with amazement.

The Adoration of the Shepherds by Mattias Stomer (17th Century)
Photo Credit: www.palazzomadamatorino.it/en/node/25302

Click. Click. And that was it. We moved towards the door of the stable to give others a chance. My kids stopped to interact with the animals as I waited outside, and then we went together to the dressing room to disrobe. When we retrieved our picture, it looked pretty comical. Everyone except for me was looking directly at the camera. I was the only one looking at the baby Jesus. To me, the photo was merely a distraction from the main event: being in the presence of a *person* – a very special person named Jesus. (I identify with the shepherds in the painting above.)

I'd like to suggest that what happened at the live nativity is a good metaphor for the challenge that we face throughout every day: will we allow ourselves to be captivated by the persons in our lives or will we be distracted from them? Will we be captivated even by strangers, by our enemies, our spouses, our parents, our kids, our friends, and by God himself? Each person I come across in a given day is a wonder, worth every ounce of my focus. When I check my smart phone for the time or the weather, the wonders of new email messages, Wikipedia, and YouTube all cry out for attention, but these wonders aren't wonders at all, when compared to a *person*. And what is this letter you're reading, when compared to the person who might be near you right now?

Each member of our team faced this same challenge every time we conducted an outreach event this year. We want to save the lives of tiny unborn human persons, but in order to do so, we

are confronted with another reality, a college student who is also a person with a bundle of conflicting beliefs and desires. At our University of Oklahoma outreach in November, I talked for a second time to a woman I'll call Diana. Diana wasn't any more enjoyable to talk to the second time than when I met her in March of this year. She displayed the same haughtiness, the same self-importance, the same close-mindedness and tendency to lecture rather than listen. I became confident I wouldn't be able to change Diana's mind on any point, and while I looked for an opportunity to gently bring a close to our conversation, I had to work to focus my attention on this person. As I did, though, I was experiencing a different sort of love, the sort that gives without hope of return. This is what a person calls forth from us: giving our attention just for the sake of appreciating the wonder of the person and the God who created her.

Veteran JFA staff members, Paul Kulas (above, with hat) and Tammy Cook (below, left) focus their attention on students from the Univ. of Oklahoma.

May I humbly suggest that you and I dedicate ourselves this Christmas to being captivated by the wonder of the persons around us – the strangers, our spouses, our kids, and even those, like Diana, who annoy us? And let us not neglect to depend on God in the midst of every interaction, that we might also be captivated by him – the one who created every person. Merry Christmas!

Yours in Christ,

Steve Wagner
Executive Director

P.S. You can still give an end-of-year gift using the enclosed giving form, our website (www.jfaweb.org/donate), or by calling 316-683-6426. Thank you for standing with us!

Ministry Notes: Recent and Upcoming Events

JFA staff members will be at the Students for Life Conferences and March for Life events in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco in January. Pray that God would orchestrate for us the connections we need to make with student pro-life clubs and the other pro-life advocates we would like to train to make abortion unthinkable in the coming year.

For recent events, see www.jfaweb.org/calendar and www.jfaweb.org/photos.

Clueless in the Face of a Great Gift?

Conversations: The Monthly Letter of Justice For All

Christmas 2016

Dear Friend,

Mine was a small gift, but they missed it.

One of my favorite panels from our new *Art of Life* Exhibit juxtaposes a classical painting of a woman holding her daughter with the words "Embracing child and career" and "better than abortion."

At the University of Oklahoma this fall, though, one free speech board (right) showed that this panel made no sense to some viewers. They pointed out, confidently, that sitting for a portrait isn't a career, and a woman in 1786 couldn't possibly have had a career anyway.

Had these students looked with just a bit more curiosity at the panel in question (right, below), they would have found etched just next to the date of the painting in the bottom right-hand corner the only clues they needed in order to discover the point of the panel — the title of the painting and the name of the painter: ***Madame Vigée-Le Brun et Sa Fille*** **[by] Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun**.

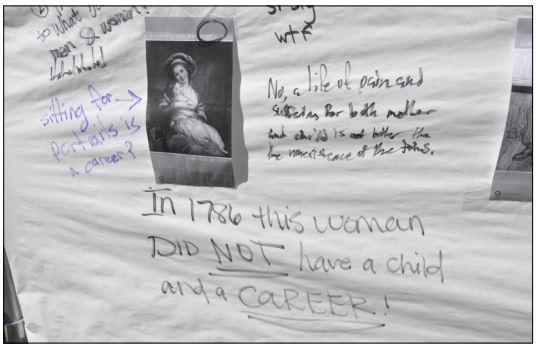
This translates to ***Mrs. Vigée-Le Brun and Her Daughter*** **[by] Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun**.

Yes, indeed, there *is* little sense in displaying this lesser-known painting from the 18th century to illustrate the idea that a woman can embrace her child and her career, unless, of course, the woman pictured in the painting is…the *painter*…and the painting is her *self-portrait*! A quick look at the website found on the panel (www.debate2dialogue.org) reveals that Vigée Le Brun was Marie Antoinette's chief portrait painter. Yes, at least one woman had a "bona fide career" in 1786!

I don't recall talking to the students who wrote these comments. When I came across the photos of the free speech board later, the fact that these students missed the point of the sign made me angry, and for a moment, I wanted to mock them and point out how foolish they were. But then I caught myself. Isn't sadness a more appropriate response? These dear people are missing out, after all.

When people outright reject or miss the point of our outreach events, our good-faith attempts to dialogue with them, the beautiful wonder of life in the womb, the truth about human rights, or any other gift we offer, it makes me sad — sad, first, that they missed the gift, and second, that I, in my weaknesses, have sometimes made it harder for them to get it.

This reflection reminds me of another gift, a gift that is not only



Above: Comments on Free Speech Board: "In 1786 this woman did NOT have a child and a CAREER!" and, [sarcastically], "Sitting for portraits is a career?"

Below: Panel from JFA's *Art of* Life Exhibit (Image: *Madame Vigée-Le Brun et Sa Fille*, by Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, France, 1786)

More Information: www.debate2dialogue.org

magnitudes greater than some of the gifts I've just been discussing, but indeed, it's also in a category all by itself. I'm referring to the gift of the incarnation of Jesus.

God's gift was a great gift, but have I missed it?

I know I have missed it to some degree. I know, because although I respond to the gift with private awe, I don't often respond with public acts of sharing the Savior I know. I am usually silent.

Contrast this timidity about the gift of Jesus with the confidence I feel when I am standing near the *Art of Life* Exhibit and have a chance to tell people about the point of this "Embracing child and career" sign. I am so taken with the sign that I can't wait to tell people about it. I want them to experience that moment of wonder, that moment of recognition that comes when one sees that this woman is embodying the embracing of both child and career, all at once, right there in the creation of this painting. I want them to experience the beauty of the optimism of the panel, the optimism that says women don't have to kill their children in order to actualize their abilities.

My eagerness to share the truth about Christ, on the other hand, is somehow just barely limping along, even though the incarnation was a much more wondrous embodying — the embodying of God himself. Perhaps my eagerness is suffocated by the dark skepticism and mocking spirit of the culture. To be sure, I also fear that the gift will simply be rejected. Is this the appropriate thankful response to God's gift — a private hoarding and a repetitive withholding of the truth from others? The troubling answer is a confident, "No."

This page from *The Psalter of St. Louis* (circa 1191-1212) alludes to two very different responses to the gift of Jesus. Above, Herod (right) talks with the magi and prepares to attempt to kill Jesus. Below, the magi bring gifts to Jesus, showing a much more appropriate sense of awe and appreciation for the gift of Jesus.

So, let's resolve, shall we, to share our experience of this beautiful miracle of the incarnation of Christ — his taking on human nature that he might ultimately redeem us through his death and resurrection. Let's resolve to share this news more publicly, even if only in small moments with strangers or friends, when we have the choice clearly set before us: *Do I now allow this moment to be mundane, or do I transform it by just saying something, taking the chance that this person will join me in a moment of recognition and wonder?*

Let's resolve not to wait, then, for only those few people we're confident will appreciate Jesus. And let's resolve also to strengthen our confidence in the greatness of the gift of Jesus through study, reflection, and prayer, so that we may speak more boldly. I have a hunch, though, that trusting God by going through the motion of "speaking forth the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:3) might itself do the work of strengthening our confidence to continue to speak.

When I think about how God is patient with me in my reluctance to share all I know of his marvelous gift to me, I'm thankful for his mercy and forbearance. Perhaps I'm just as clueless as the students who mocked the *Art of Life* sign. Perhaps more. Yet, God is patient with me, a seeker who longs to appreciate his great gifts with the response they deserve. If God is patient with me, clueless in the face of his great gift, how much more can I be patient with those whom God has called me to engage in conversation, especially when they reject the gift I am offering them?

In awe of God's great Christmas gift,

Steve Wagner
Executive Director

Ministry Notes (Recent/Upcoming Events, More Christmas Reflections): www.jfaweb.org/dec-2016-more

You Can Still Give a Year-End Gift: www.jfaweb.org/donate

Face to Face

A Message from Justice For All Director, Steve Wagner

Christmas 2017

Dear Friend,

Look at the face of Jesus in Rembrandt's masterful *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee.* It's clear from his expression and the placement of his hand that he's just waking up. The disciples are in utter despair at the mercy of a great storm, but they are about to see another convincing proof of "his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Jesus is the Son of God, about to support that truth with evidence. Yet it's striking that Jesus is *face to face* with this motley crew, physically present in the boat with them, dazed as he wakes from sleep just as they would be dazed in waking. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us…" (John 1:14)

In becoming flesh, Jesus dwelt among the disciples in all of their mess. He was *face to face* with their fear and their lack of faith, present with them so that they could relate to his glory in a way particularly necessary for them.

Jesus related to people *face to face*. We aspire to imitate our Savior in this simple motion every time we step onto a college campus to try to help some of those who are far from Christ's perspective come closer to the truth and closer to Christ. We aspire to imitate Christ every time we step into a workshop or seminar to lead a group of Christ's followers in interactive exercises, preparing them to create conversations.

I invite you to look at the art on the right again. Reflect on the very special miracle of Christ's *face to face* relationship with his disciples which reveals a unique dimension of His love for them (and for each of us).

I invite you also to spend some time looking at the pictures from our recent events (www.jfaweb.org/photos), reflecting on the striking image you'll see repeated over and over in those photos, too: we are simply followers of Christ, humbly seeking to relate *face to face* with people in desperate need, hoping to save very small children and very desperate mothers from the tragedy and horror of abortion. Thank you for partnering with us to train Christians to make these *face to face* encounters common. Merry Christmas!

Top: *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1633 (see Mark 4:35-41). Image courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston. See www.gardnermuseum.org for the fascinating story of this work's whereabouts. **Bottom:** Detail

That all may behold His glory,

Steve Wagner
Executive Director

PS: You can still give a special year-end gift in 2017 using www.jfaweb.org/donate or by calling 316-683-6426!

It's in Our Nature

A Message from Justice For All Director, Steve Wagner

Christmas 2018

Dear Friend,

I remember seeing news stories about "The Miraculous Journey," a massive 14-piece sculpture by Damien Hirst, when it was unveiled in 2013 in Doha, Qatar. I was amazed at the scale of this public dialogue tool, chronicling the development of the unborn from fertilization to birth. (I thought, "I wish everyone could see this. It would be sure to get people talking." Indeed, you *can* use the picture links we've just posted at **www.jfaweb.org/doha** to get people talking!) Shortly after its unveiling, the sculpture was covered, and it mysteriously remained covered for about five years.

Just last month, though, the sculpture was "born again" and is now back on public display. It illustrates the nature of the early human being at work. His human nature moves him from comfortable dependence on his mother's womb out into the harsh realities of a foreign world, and his human nature enables him to confront those challenges.

At this time of Christmas, we're reminded of how the Son of God, possessing the divine nature as the second person of the Trinity, took on that same human nature and "lived in it" with perfection, as human life was meant to be lived. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our human nature has been made new by faith:

> **"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (II Cor. 5:17-21)**

The Son of God took on a second nature to save us, and now a new set of activities can become "second nature" for us. Just as the nature of the early human enables him to accomplish all of his activities, our new nature enables us to bring the word of reconciliation as Christ's ambassadors to lost people operating in an old nature based on old things.

As we celebrate Jesus this Christmas and come into the harsh realities of a new year, with all of its challenges to the smallest humans on earth and to women distressed by unintended pregnancy, this is our prayer for ourselves and for you:

> **"Loving Father, through Your Son Jesus you gave us a new nature to love and serve you. We trust you will strengthen us to live according to this new nature, as we seek to bring the word of reconciliation to every human being involved in unintended pregnancies."**

Thank you for partnering with us to help Christians discover the abilities of this new God-given nature through practical dialogue training. It is a joy to see them extend the word of reconciliation to those who so desperately need it.

Merry Christmas!

Steve Wagner
Executive Director

PS: You can still give a year-end gift in 2018 at **www.jfaweb.org/donate** or by calling **316-683-6426**!

Great Interruptions

A Message from Justice For All Director, Steve Wagner

Christmas 2020

Dear Friend,

On the afternoon of Christmas day in 2019, our family of seven seemed a bit aimless, so we decided to pile into our mini-van and go surprise our friends with a bit of caroling.

In an era of text message arrangements, caroling is perhaps the last acceptable vestige of an important form of social interruption: *dropping by*. We were a bit hesitant, but we were reasonably sure that our caroling would be seen as a welcome diversion. We could simply sing a few songs on the porch and leave, after all. As it happened, our friends happily folded us into their Christmas day plans. They invited us in. The adults talked, and the kids played.

As we move through the Christmas season and into 2021, we need to make this sort of interrupting a habit, and not just when we're caroling. The result might indeed be as positive as we experienced last Christmas, but it also might be awkward. We might inconvenience. Still, it's important. COVID-19 may mean "dropping by" takes on different forms, but interrupting in some way is perhaps even more important given the current isolation most people are feeling.

Great interruptions are sometimes necessary to demonstrate great love.

Remember the four friends who let down their paralytic friend through the roof, interrupting Jesus right in the middle of teaching a crowd? This was a great interruption. Jesus took it in stride and, the Scripture says, "seeing their faith" he claimed to forgive the man's sins. Then he proved that he had authority to forgive those sins by healing the man. He responded to the great love shown by the four friends by showing the great love of God in healing the man spiritually and physically. (See Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26.)

The Son of God's response to this great interruption highlighted an even greater interruption that he was carrying out: *he had interrupted history by taking on human flesh so that he could completely interrupt the works of darkness, overturn the corruption of sin, and draw human beings into the life for which God created them*. This is the great interruption we welcome as we celebrate Christmas.

Great interruptions are sometimes necessary to demonstrate great love.

As we reflect on these "great interruptions" (great in both senses), let's consider our love for people, for God, for the truth, for those in danger (such as unborn children), and for those in distress (such as women confronting unintended pregnancy). Demonstrating love for each of these is worth interrupting the daily course of events. I encourage you to interrupt people's lives with phone calls and visits, and even (if all else fails) text messages or social media.

Here's one practical way you can interrupt: *invite friends to our Love3 Online Workshops beginning January 18, 2021 (www.jfaweb.org/love3)*. Because the name Love3 refers to loving the woman in distress, the unborn child, and the person who disagrees with us, just the invitation can lead to a conversation about each of the things I've mentioned above. Why Love3? Because God loves each of those people. Why Love3? Because women and children and pro-choice advocates are intrinsically valuable image-bearers of God. Why attend Love3 workshops? Because each of us needs to develop the skill of artfully navigating difficult conversations. Ultimately, we interrupt so that the love of God can cause a "great interruption" in the lives of every human being.

Merry Christmas!

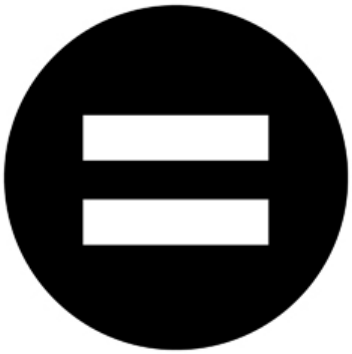
Steve Wagner, Executive Director

Jesus heals the paralytic lowered through the roof. (Stained Glass, St. Colman's Cathedral in Ireland; Image: Andreas F. Borchert, CC 4.0)

Help JFA Create "Great Interruptions" in 2021

Thank you for your faithful support of Justice For All. There's still time to give an end-of-year gift. Go to **www.jfaweb.org/donate** or postmark your gift by December 31, 2020.

Read More by Steve: www.jfaweb.org/steve-wagner



Justice For All trains thousands
to make abortion unthinkable for millions,
one person at a time.

To help:

www.jfaweb.org 316-683-6426 jfa@jfaweb.org