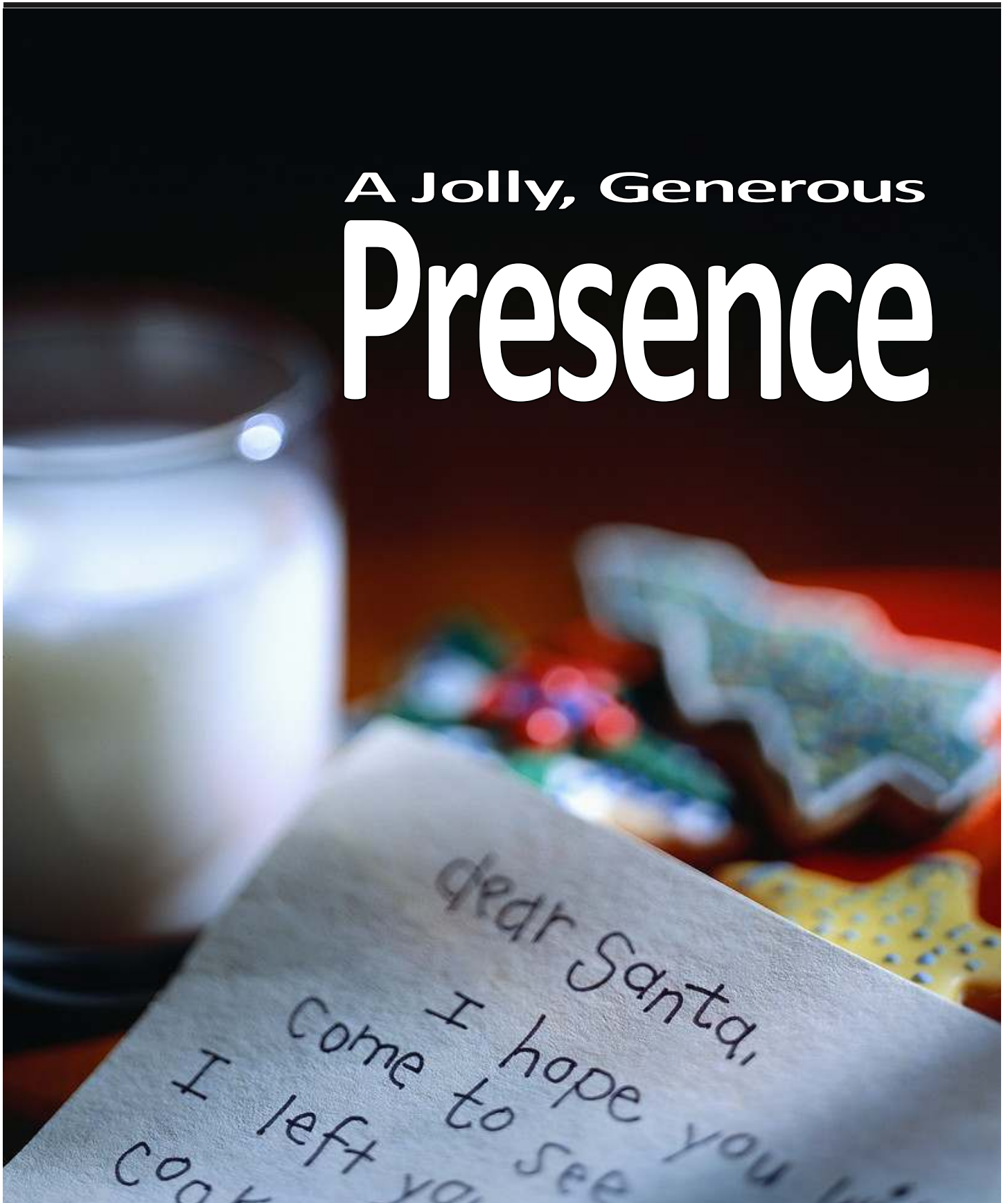

The Barnabas Letter

*a newsletter from The Barnabas Center,
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and teaching ministry in Charlotte, NC*

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A Jolly, Generous Presence



By Roger Edwards

A Jolly, Generous Presence

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Mark 10. 15

Twas the night before Christmas when I stopped believing in Santa Claus. I was 8; it was Christmas Eve. And all through my house, no one was stirring (or so I thought) - not even a mouse.

But I saw lights and heard noises outside my window. It was like a clatter. So I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. But I'm sad to say, there was no sleigh. Nor did there appear eight tiny reindeer. Out past the shutter, I looked, and through the sash. It was our blue ford station wagon parked in the grass. No prancing on roof and pawing of hoof. It was mom and dad unloading packages - oof!

My dad looked cold and like he just wanted to get finished. There was no Ho-Ho-Ho. No laughing round belly the shook like jelly. They emptied the car; the porch light went dead. The sugar plum visions dissolved from my head.

I lay back down. Same bed. Same PJs. But everything was different. "So that's it," I thought. "The big kids were right." Suddenly, I didn't feel like making things rhyme anymore.

I began to piece it together. My letters to the North Pole? They may read them, but never really send them. The sudden appearance of presents? They store them at grandma's until I'm asleep. Santa's empty hot chocolate mug and the cookie? Probably my dad. This has been going on all along.

I wasn't entirely shocked. This realization had been coming, as I got older. I don't think I cried - just lay there. It felt like a TV show ending. That's all. Or maybe a door closing.

I didn't dwell on it. To be honest, the discovery wasn't completely negative. For one thing, there were still presents. And something else, I experi-

enced a trade-off. I may have lost some expectation but in return I felt more clever and bigger. I had seen through something; I was on the other side of the secret. A moment of Gnosticism.

It was like finding out how a magician does a trick. It spoils the magic, of course, but you get this empowering sense of being 'in the know'.

That night was a telling transition in my childhood. The next morning I awoke with a more factual picture of reality. But I wonder now; was it a truer picture? I went to bed believing in mystery. I woke up believing in Ford station wagons.

I don't really miss Santa Claus, per se. In fact, I've never done the Santa thing with my children. But I miss the part of me that I traded away, the part of me that believed that on top this world is a Giver, who wants you to receive His gifts with joy.

You see, as a child I had a deep conviction that in this universe there existed a jolly and generous presence. Somewhere out there, a certain someone had my name written down on a special list. And it wasn't because I was in trouble either. He had written my name, I believed, because I mattered to him. All the kids in the world and yet he had my name.

Not only did he know my name, I would have told you, but he knew all sorts of things about me; my favorite color, my yet undiscovered talents, my secret wishes. When I was little, I accepted without difficulty that he thought about me quite a lot and even took pleasure in doing so. At times, I felt his eyes on me. They were warm. I was able to accept this grace without pride or shame. It was his nature to give, so it was OK to like it. When he came to town, I believed, something amazing might happen. And it might happen to me. It just might.

Someone thinking of me! This thrill was a genuine experience. In the days before Christmas, excitement did somersaults in my chest. It banged

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around so much that it hurt. But then something changed. I just don't get excited about Christmas like I once did. Perhaps I don't feel alive like that about anything anymore. But I miss it. I miss the anticipation, the I-just-can't-wait-til-morning feeling. What happened to me? Sometimes now, I dread morning. And so I wonder sometimes... have I outgrown joy?

Jesus once said that you must be as a little child in order to receive the kingdom of God. There it is. God is a big and generous Presence. Your name is written on his mind. It is His nature to give. It is OK to receive it gladly. But you must be little in order to receive. Will you?

For most adults, receiving is a complicated emotional maneuver. We are embarrassed by the whole transaction. Not wanting to become too hopeful or too disappointed, we feign indifference. And if we are touched, we awkwardly express it. "Oh, you shouldn't have," we say and avert our eyes.

But as uncomfortable as receiving is now, it was once a natural impulse. Perhaps, before sin, the fundamental human impulse was to receive gift-love with whole-hearted delight. When we were little, Jesus says, we were somehow closer to it.

Maybe that's where I went wrong. I bought into the idea that growing up means trading in your littleness for control. It is inevitable and necessary, of course, to leave your childhood. Santa and your invisible friends must go. But perhaps I have gone too far. In my rush to be a big and clever adult, have I abandoned my core human identity? Have I ceased to see myself as God's little one?

Littleness is the overlooked advantage of childhood. Littleness helps you receive. Here's how. First, being little helps you see that receiving is necessary. To get out of the crib, you must be helped. To see what is on the other side of the fence or to get a drink from the fountain, you must be lifted up. For an adult, being picked up is a terror. For a child, receiving is an everyday necessity.

But receiving isn't just about practicality. When you receive outside strength in your little body, you can do all things. You can fly. Do you remember launching yourself off the bed, knowing that strong hands will catch you? Even if you have your eyes closed. You laugh and vibrate inside. It is like letting yourself be tumbled by a wave. Or being strapped into a bicycle seat and then letting go of the edges

on a downhill run. Receiving is abandoning yourself into another's strength. Littleness is the prerequisite to this kind of joy. Littleness is, in fact, the prerequisite to all joy.

As a child, it seemed natural to believe in something bigger than myself. It was the intuitive, obvious corollary to my littleness. I wanted to believe. Why, in heavens name, would you want to be the biggest? If you had to be the biggest then who would catch you when you flung yourself into the day? Why, you would have to stop. You would have to be a lot more careful. But back when I believed in that strong and mirthful presence; trust was equivalent to fun, and littleness was an advantage.

Christmas is the time to remember your littleness. It is the time to embrace serious dependency. For Christmas is the time when children are given kingdoms. It is the time when the meek inherit the earth. It is the time when a virgin, scarcely adult, receives into her body the fullness of God. Christmas is the time to become little enough to receive the biggest gift of all.

Christmas is when God gave His son. You can only understand this gift, or any gift, when you receive it. You can't understand God's gift with caution and skepticism. You must receive the Christ with sheer abandon. You must rush headlong into Christmas morning with the full tilt of a child in footie pajamas. You must throw your arms apart to the mad thought that you have not been forgotten. You must embrace the wild claim that you are the object of divine love.

'Do not fear!' the Christmas angels commanded when they blazed suddenly into sight. Receive their glad tidings with the obvious response of being glad. Throw back your head. Laugh out loud. Drink in the attention of God your Father. Favor, real favor has come your way.

Something amazing is happening. And it is happening to you.

"Receiving is abandoning yourself into another's strength. Littleness is the prerequisite to this kind of joy. Littleness is, in fact, the prerequisite to all joy."

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Upcoming Opportunities

| Date | Event | Facilitator |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| February 6-7, 2009 | Barnabas Training Basic — A two day seminar to learn greater confidence and capacity to love others. Includes teaching on a biblical model of people and an interactive small group experience. <i>Hosted by Hope Community Church</i> | <i>Barnabas Staff</i> |
| April 17-18, 2009 | Heart to Heart Express —This seminar teaches Biblical principles of marriage along with practical ways to insert them into your relationship. Includes a series of guided confidential personal conversations. <i>Location: Church at Charlotte</i> | <i>Palmer and Roger</i> |
| Check website for 2009 dates | The Quest —A men's adventure outing including backpacking, conversation, study and reflection. A full year is planned, but check our website in January for new dates. | <i>Pete Bondy</i> |
| Monday evenings Groups begin February 23 | Barnabas Training Level One —Built on the Biblical Model taught in Barnabas Training Basic, this small group training will focus on application of the model with others, as participants learn to listen and ask questions. | <i>Barnabas Staff</i> |
| Tuesday evenings Groups begin January 27 | Honor's Program for Men —A 14-week small group program where men who struggle with sexually addictive behavior can come together to lay a solid foundation for relational recovery. | <i>John Pierce</i> |
| Thursday evenings Groups begin January 12 | Honors Program for Women —For women whose husbands struggle with sexual addiction to grieve losses and make decisions about their own recoveries. 14 weeks. | <i>Annie Schleyer</i> |
| Group begins week of Jan 26 | Healing Hearts —For women who have experienced abuse in childhood. It provides a biblically-based, confidential context where women can wrestle with difficult realities related to their harm. | <i>Lauren Peters</i> |
| Thursday evenings Group begins January 29 | Honors Program for Women and Healing Hearts Advanced Group —Honors and HH are joining efforts to offer a series of workshops and intensive groups. | <i>Annie and Lauren</i> |
| Groups begin in February | Barnabas Training Level Four —For graduates of BT Level 2, this small group assists 4-6 individuals to grow in confidence in the model of caring for others | <i>Barnabas Staff</i> |
| TBA | Honors Couples —For couples who are already working on healing and changing patterns brought about by sexual brokenness. Call office if interested. | <i>John Pierce</i> |