Not the same old (Christmas) story

Every year around this time, we're bound to hear a familiar set of narratives in the media. How much we'll spend. How far we'll travel. How far behind retail sales are compared to last year. It's time to put aside the tired stories. Here are three replacement conversations we should be having this Christmas.

Instead of talking about … How much to spend.

Talk about … How much to give.

"So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth" (Jb 5:16, RSV). According to a national survey by the Center for a New American Dream, 70 percent of us would opt for less focus on gift giving and spending at Christmas. Let's face it: Some of us have too much stuff as it is. And many of us could afford to swap some of our wants for someone else's needs. So instead of having the tiresome conversation about how much to spend on white-elephant gifts for the office party, let's talk instead about how much of a difference $5 or $10 could make to someone who really needs it.

Instead of talking about … Whose family's "turn" it is to have Christmas.

Talk about … How to spend time with those who need us most.

"Turn to me, and be gracious for me; for I am lonely and afflicted" (Ps 25:16, RSV). We place great emphasis on Rockwellian "home and hearth and family" at Christmas. In all the bustle, we often forget that some of our friends and family members are alone at Christmas. Instead of

renegotiating where we're spending Christmas Eve and with whom are we going to Mass, focus on who might be lonely this Christmas. Who has lost someone this year, or last year, or even years ago? Who are recent empty nesters? Who simply doesn't have anywhere to go or anyone to be with? The gifts of time and your presence are far more worthy discussions than keeping score of who "had Christmas" last year.

Instead of talking about … The people you're dreading seeing at Christmas.

Talk about … The people who most need your love.

"I said, 'I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; / I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence'" (Ps 39:1, RSV). When asked (usually jokingly) which of her five kids my mom loved most, she'd always give the same answer: "The one who is away until they're home. The one who is sick until they're well. The one who is hurting until they are whole." The time we waste at the holidays complaining about the people in our lives we'd rather not see often takes our attention away from those right in front of us who need us most. Instead of rehashing the grudges of Christmases past, talk instead about forgiveness and reconciliation. Instead of complaining about those who rub us the wrong way, seek out those who bring out the Christmas spirit in us. Generosity of spirit is infectious; and it starts with the words we use.