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Muskegon, MI

December 16, 2018

“NICE IS NICE -- BE GOOD FOR GOODNESS’ SAKE”

What has prompted this sermon, knowing it would be delivered amidst the good will and joy that permeates much of the world this time of the year, is a concern that many have raised regarding the babble, the fabrications, demonizing, the lack of civility which permeates much of our social media, and our political discourse.

Hate crimes were up 17% last year and are increasing this year. Hate websites are increasing as well and they give fuel to predators, such as was the case of the recent slaughter in the Jewish Temple in Pittsburg?

Are there any nice people around?

I would add that no other country protects hate speech more than we do in the United States. But the great First Amendment granting us freedom of speech and of the press should not be an excuse to fuel hatred. Words matter.

In our modern world, researchers have found a 50% drop in the usage of words such as love, patience, kindness, gentleness. Even the American Humanist Association regrets the hardening of our spiritual discourse.

A few years ago, the National Endowment for the Humanities, initiated a fifty-state civility tour to confront the coarseness in our nation’s public manners. Their conclusion was the simple truth, “Civilization requires civility.”

All this made me think about what makes for nice people, as mundane as that sounds. And I further thought, as Christmas is just nine days away that a jumping off place about niceness was to return to the so-called Merry Christmas debate and Santa Claus himself. After all, niceness is what Santa explicitly requires of us and Christianity is about love of neighbor.

The historical Saint Nicholas, as you probably know, was a third century Christian Bishop from what today is Turkey. He was good person, although quite melancholic because he saw so much poverty and pain in the world. But he also was tender and warm and of great generosity. One of the strongest legends was when he provided

dowries for three poor girls so they would not have to become prostitutes. He remains the prostitute's patron saint today, as well as the patron saint of many groups, including I am told of even lawyers. There are more churches named after St. Nichols than any other.

Well he was a gift giver. He died on December 6th and on that his Saint's day is when many other cultures receive and exchange presents and not on Christmas day. Over the years, especially in the United States he was transmogrified into the chubby, jolly figure we have today. He even acquired a wife here in 1889 and a new residence at the North Pole. But I believe he still remains essentially what he was, the advocate for children, especially those in dire circumstances. May his work of love and giving continue.

At least my favorite minister thought so. Duncan Littlefair, former minister of Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids. He declared that "Santa Claus is a symbol of warmth and caring. Children need sometimes to know that they are at the center of things. Can you remember wondering how in the world Santa Claus knew where you lived? How could he find you?"

And then there are the gifts that come mysteriously. How in the world did they get there? Even though you knew Santa was bringing them, you can't believe it. If you never meet another miracle in your life, you met it there; and you know that the world is capable of being miraculous. Don't worry about fantasy in your children. Don't try to be too realistic. They don't want your realism," Duncan adds, "Just your love."

Duncan, of course, would agree that if Santa becomes just another means of over consumption in our society something will be lost. We do live in a country of horrendous consumption. And most children, not all, have more things than they need.

Never the less, and to my surprise, Santa has actually grown in popularity around the world since I last focused on him. Ecumenically he has crossed the religious divide and is found in practically every culture, Christian or not. Even in Asia, especially in Japan, he has become a major part of their Christmas celebration.

And, as several of my Rabbi friends have told me, Santa and Christmas gift-giving have had a big impact on Hanukkah, which to their mind was originally a minor Jewish celebration, but has now become the major celebration it is today. There is even a Jewish Santa! Go on the web to Saturday Night Live, and see how Hanukkah

Harry substituted for a sick Santa Claus and saved Christmas. You will like Hanukkah Harry.

And a few years ago, in Mid-East Jordan, a children's charity group created what has now become the Muslim Santa, referred to as Baba Noel. He looks and behaves the same in his red suit but his beard is black and his famous laugh is now, Hoi, Hoi, Hoi. So there you have it: Christian, Jewish, Moslem Santas!

On the other hand, there are non-believers, such as the Vicar of the Church of England who told his eight-year-old parishioners that "Santa is impossible. There is no scientific evidence he could do what he claims and in fact he was dead." Well, now I appreciate a strong preacher but, more wisely, I think, his adult parishioners thought what they needed was a new priest!

I am sure some where back as a child I did believe in him. With eleven in our family, Christmas Eve and morning were unforgettable magic times for us all. They still warm my heart and I continue the early traditions I was taught. But when I became a minister, my piety, a little too Simon pure, led me to down play Santa's presence with my own children. I just didn't mention him but highlighted more the St Nicholas of history.

Our children, of course, expected him anyway, and they were always surprised by the gifts under the tree on Christmas morn. When they asked about the source of the gifts I only replied, "Well, Christmas is such a lovely mysterious thing, isn't it? Full of miracles. When our hearts are grateful gifts just seem to come, don't they?"

Yes, I admit I was more of a purist about Christmas then thinking it is Jesus' birthday celebration after all.

I remember when I was still a young minister in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, an artist had painted a lovely wintry holiday scene on the front window of a very fashionable disco. But as I walked by admiring it, I saw in smaller letters in the smoke gently rising from the chimney of the log cabin of this pastoral scene the words, "F . . . Christmas!" It was a four-letter word that even the most liberal preacher would never use in the pulpit. It saddened me and I was a little taken back with it. So, I went into the bar and asked who the artist was and he happened to be there. We sat down, had a drink, and I told him I thought he had a great artistic gift but I was also interested why he had added the words in the chimney smoke.

And he told me. It seems his life was full of tragedy and disappointment. He had been dumped on more than he had been loved. He was a disillusioned Vietnam veteran, and had become thoroughly cynical about life. His was a sad tale. And we know at this time of year, a lot of people are especially depressed and often feel more lonely.

Well, we had another drink and more talk. It was a nice moment. I never asked that he do it, or would I, but the next day the words were gone from that lovely scene and I could only hope they were gone from his heart.

It does seem that this complaining about the true meaning of Christmas, from both the religious and the non-religious, is often engaged in with hot passion.

And, not surprising, Fox News has spent much of its time for years berating the commercialization of Christmas, the attempts to remove manger scenes from the public square, the removal of Christmas carols from schools, and especially with stores not permitting their clerks to wish customers a Merry Christmas, just Happy Holidays. In fact, they made a list of such stores and promoted a boycott of them. They had declared there is a “War on Christmas” and they would be its defenders! Well, I didn’t enlist. But the Ku Klux Klan did, one Klansman telling me directly they, too, wanted to put Christ back in Christmas.

Of course, President Trump enlisted, and big time! He declared in his campaign he would make saying Merry Christmas acceptable again. It was his biggest applause line in his campaign speeches, giving evidence that many certainly agreed with him. Of course, in saying so, he had quite politicized Christmas, even though he usually railed against those who bow down to political correctness.

Indeed, Mr. Trump said more. He promised to Make Christmas Great Again! Perhaps, I thought, by that he means he would make health care available to all? What a Christmas gift that would be. But no. He actually tried to reduce medical care!

But maybe I thought he would, let the Dreamers who were brought here as children stay in our country and give them a path to earn citizenship. That would enrich a whole lot of Christmases! But no such grace. It was just a ‘Merry Christmas’ without good gifts, like dropping lumps of coal, quite literally, in our stockings which we had momentarily hung in hopefulness.

Since I am of the persuasion that we should let people everywhere get all they can out of Christmas, and say whatever is in their hearts, I will also leave the criticism

of Santa as being too cozy with commercial interests to others. What I am curious about is the effect Santa has on the psyche of the children themselves. Is believing in Santa Claus a good thing? Will believing in him enhance their character? And most importantly, when they grow up will they still try to be nice as they did for Santa?

Most children do eagerly anticipate Santa's coming, albeit with a twinge of anxiety. After all, they have heard and undoubtedly could recite Santa's advent song,

**You better watch out, you better not cry.
You better not pout, I'm telling your why
Santa Claus is coming to town.** (And listen carefully to the rest.)

**He's making a list and checking it twice,
Gonna find out who is naughty and nice.
Santa Claus is coming to town.** (And there is no escape.)

**He sees you when you're sleeping.
He knows when you're awake.
He knows when you've been good or bad,
So be good for goodness' sake.**

It declares, Santa, after all, is not just some jolly elfish character who comes freely showering gifts, but is rather the judge and jury regarding who are the good and bad children. And, like the orthodox view of God, Santa, too, is **omniscient**; all wise and knowing, **omnipresent**; everywhere, so you can't hide from him, and **omnipotent**; all powerful, able to deliver what he promises.

The song's author, Haven Gillespie, was born and raised across the Ohio River just short distance from the Presbyterian Church I served in Cincinnati where he was a columnist for our city's paper. I believe Gillespie's song does captured the long held cultural understanding that Santa is a moral force to be reckoned with.

The song was first heard on the air when Eddie Cantor, a devout Jew, sang it on his program in 1934 and it was an instant success. It remains in 3rd place on the Christmas hit parade, just behind *Rudolph*, and the all time favorite, *White Christmas* with Bing Crosby.

What Santa demands, at best, is that all children get busy and look into their hearts to make sure they are choosing nice over naughty.

Of course, gifts are both the incentive and the reward for being nice, even though there is also the more transcending plea in the song, to “be good for goodness’s sake.” Or, we might add, for God’s sake, or for our own sake, or for the sake of the whole planet.

To be sure, the nice and not naughty that Santa wants to see is pretty much what parents want to see with their children. We tell them, don’t we, now be polite, don’t say bad words, don’t be pushy, don’t steal, don’t interrupt people, and tell the truth. And, how many times have parents reminded their children, “Now play nice.” Which, of course, is what we all need to do!

After all, the opposite of being nice is being disagreeable, unpleasant, discourteous, inconsiderate, arrogant, selfish, stingy, unkind, and harmful. The world has far too much of such behavior.

At first glance the word nice does seem a little shallow to be on the list of the great virtues.

But, again, who of us wants to be known for not being nice?

In seminary I would have the radio on while studying, and every Sunday night a rather lively religious group came on. I would leave it on because of the lively music which dominated the program. But I still remember, now fifty years later, the way they signed off the air, “Good night to all of you in radio land. And until next week, just remember, it’s nice to be nice.”

I used to cringe at such a benediction. Not love your neighbor as yourself, or love your enemies, or practice the Golden rule, or don’t judge lest you be judged. No, just a simple reminder, it’s nice to be nice. Well, I don’t belittle such ideology any longer.

Nice is essential! In its absence the Scrooges and the Grinches prevail. As for “Santa Clause is Coming to Town”, most parents don’t mind the theology behind it because it fits comfortably with their own understanding of God who calls us to a higher accountability, a good faith effort of giving and loving.

I don’t think it is damaging, to even little ones, to know that Santa wants to check on who’s been naughty or nice as long as children do know they will be loved no matter what. Although the late Mr. Rogers, a kind of saint himself, warned, don’t make Santa too fearsome or scary.

Certainly, it is better if we all would act ethically out of our own good heart and not because big brother, big Santa, or big God is watching. Einstein offers, “If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.”

Still, we know we don’t do well without some policing, some checks and balances. Even Alan Greenspan, former stubborn head of the Federal Reserve, now famously confesses that the humans on Wall Street are as flawed as any of us on Main Street – thus the need for firm regulations on Wall Street not less.

But what happens when Santa goes? Soon enough, children do learn the secret, the deception, behind Santa Claus. Were they betrayed? Yes, but it’s a sort of cultural lie and not just that of their parents, and all, in time, forgiven.

All in all, we need not worry about promoting fantasy in our children, as Littlefair said. They don’t need life’s hard realism dumped too early on them. They only want our love anyway. The only danger, as one mother told me, is to tell the truth about Santa too early as she did with her son, for it took several days for him to begin to smile at her again.

Most children who once believed, will grow up and continue the good will and the soft heartiness of the Santa story. And if their children or grandchildren begin to doubt Santa’s reality, they surely will want to read the most published opinion column of all time, “Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus.” First printed in the New York Sun in 1897.

And how nice that a few weeks ago in the Muskegon Chronicle, that whole editorial was printed. Plus a host of wonderful thoughts and carols for this time of year, along with other celebrations, including Hanukkah, and Kwanza. It was well done.

But what happens when God goes? Is everything in life then permitted? Many have worried about that. But, for most, God remains, hopefully in some shape such as in a good conscience, or moral integrity, or as love, as the Bible suggests.

World religion scholar, Karen Armstrong, in her new book, *The Case for God* does offer a critical commentary though. She writes, “We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our God view remained somewhat childish.”

Yes, I would agree and suggest that a more mature theology would be open-ended about God, more inclusive and more universal, acknowledging the mysterious nature of God whose presence none of us can finally define or exclusively possess. At least let us agree, a life before God, or a life without God, humility would be an absolute necessity for each of us.

Yes, if the modern world is to find God, it must be through love, not fear.

And since religion will always be with us, there will never be peace among the nations until there is peace between all the world's major religions. Whatever faith we have, we better get busy at that. I believe that the broad faith witness of the Unitarian-Universalist congregations are a real help towards that goal.

As for God's reality, I suspect that throughout history, no matter what has transpired, God has never ceased to be present in a loving heart. The original Santa, St Nicholas, was an incarnation of that love. It would be nice if we too, could incarnate that love.

But again, I have come to realize, as far as Christmas and Santa and all the hoopla this season brings, let everyone get all they can out of it. Christmastide ought to be something more like a party, a banquet, and don't worry too much how others celebrate it or don't. Find what works for you. Move on to new traditions. And bring some of your joy to others, for there are many who feel sad and lonely like my new artist friend did during this season.

Thoreau used to say about life simplify, simplify, simplify and there is much truth in that. But, it seems to me, that Jesus' mantra was celebrate, celebrate, celebrate! His parables were about just that - celebrate when finding the lost coin, or the lost sheep, on the return of the prodigal son, and why not do as he did, make more wine at a wedding feast.

Christmas is meant to be about joy. Joy to the world! In the five Presbyterian Churches that I served, the largest and most deeply touching services of the year, was on Christmas eve, that silent night, that holy night. For there in a manger a great gift was given to the world, a babe who would bring Light and Love and Life in abundance, to all!

Yes, Go tell it on the mountain! Or do as Father O Shea once suggested of these weeks before Christmas:

“Spike the eggnog, trim the tree, put on Pavarotti, write cards, stuff the bird, plum the pudding, mince the pie, sing the carols, build the snowperson, log the fire, and for a moment, connect the birth of Christ with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

Well, I never did like Rudolph, but then I read the true story behind the author, Robert May, and found it very touching indeed. You can look it up. You, too, will be touched.

So, this Christmas, let us simply take a deep breath, take a deep breath of grace, and then do as the angelic Heavens declared over Bethlehem, bring good tidings and peace to all, and also remembering, it's nice to be nice. Amen!