

1 Sermon, Christmas Day 2011

Texts: Esther 9:15-22, Matthew 1:18-21

Title: "What if Santa Were More Like Jesus?"

Over the past months, Santa's helpers have been in the malls, and have visited places in Columbus. Santa has appeared on many Christmas Cards and on television.

Now, here it is, Christmas morning, and Santa has visited many homes around the world. At many of them, he has left gifts.

Santa has had help from Empty Stocking Clubs, the NICC Foundation, and even some of you have helped Santa in his goal of generosity.

Santa gets an A+ for hard work, and for good intentions, but sometimes his follow through isn't quite as good.

I don't blame him — For all of us human beings, our follow-through isn't quite as good as our intentions.

Despite all that may happen in a workshop at the North Pole, or in stores or online, there are some homes where Children desire a visit from Santa, but Santa never comes. There are homes where gifts don't come, and other homes where Santa delivers a little too generously.

It's the dark side of Christmas; that Santa is not able to do everything we hope Santa would do. And it's probably unfair to expect Santa to perform miracles.

And if some children get too many gifts, well, it's probably just adults acting in the *name* of Santa who spoil those children.

Yes, it's probably unfair to expect Santa to perform miracles. He's not Jesus, after all. No human being could really know how every child has been bad or good.

But sometimes I also think that Santa doesn't quite get it. He seems to think that gift giving will really change the world. Santa seems to think that giving *things* will make the difference.

Jesus knows that it's sacrificial love – giving yourself -- that changes the world.

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We just read a passage from the book of Esther, which is in part a morality tale about courage in the face of great odds.

Esther decided to give herself sacrificially. She took courage and spoke to the King at great risk to her own life. It went well, because the result was that, instead of her uncle and the Judean people being put to death, it was their enemy, Haman, who was put to death. The Judeans were also given permission to defend themselves, and many non-Judeans were killed.

In fact, the book of Esther tells us that the ancient Judeans gave gifts at the holiday of Purim, remembering with thanksgiving the slaughtering of their enemies.

The ancient Judeans seemed to believe that God had blessed them thru the sacrifice of *other* people.

Jesus turned that around. He blessed others by *his own* sacrifice. And Jesus teaches us that it is by our sacrifice, by taking up our own cross that we can make a difference.

I never hear the words Santa and sacrifice in the same sentence. It's almost as though people expect Santa to produce gifts without any cost! People seem to expect Santa just to be jolly all the time, with a happy face and keep giving, giving, giving.

But Jesus teaches that it's a narrow road, that you have to put yourself last, that it's a sacrifice to give. I think that's really more realistic. Jesus said,

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.” Luke 6:21-23, NRSV.

Jesus seems to think that we should be willing to sacrifice our reputations, be put out in the cold, to do good with no reward. He said,

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Luke 6:35, NRSV.

Any gift given that really means something comes at a cost.

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And in those really meaningful gifts, the cost is not measured in money, but measured in time and effort and love.

We have just hints of that in the passage from Matthew. Joseph was given a decision about what to do. His marriage to Mary had been arranged formally, but they were not actually living together. He found out that Mary was pregnant, and it was clearly not by him.

What should he do?

Would he repudiate his betrothal to Mary, and sacrifice her reputation?

Would he just go through with the marriage and be a laughingstock, with people knowing he married a woman who was pregnant out of wedlock? That meant he would raise a child that wasn't his. Back then they believed that the woman was just a vessel for the incubation of a man's seed. So if someone else had sown the seed... the child had nothing to do with him.

Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly, thereby trying to avoid shame for either Mary or himself.

But then an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream, and he changed his mind. He decided to endure the judgmental looks of others and get married to Mary. It was truly a gift that Joseph gave to Mary – providing her a home and being father to her child.

It was a gift that had a cost.

I think Santa knows that good gifts have a cost. But I'm guessing that he knows that people don't want to think about it. They'd rather just enjoy the gifts and the giving, and the decorations and trimming.

I think Santa knows that what the world really needs is a savior, not just a giver.

I think Santa knows that people not only need to be given things, but they need things to be taken away.

People need their guilt taken away.

People need their burdens taken away.

People need their envy taken away.

People need their sense of superiority taken away.

People need their sense of inferiority taken away.

People need their desire for more and more stuff taken away.

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These things need to be taken away, and the only way to do it is through forgiveness and freedom. That's what Jesus offers, and Santa knows it.

Forgiveness comes as a free offer, and it is backed up by the cross. Freedom comes if we allow Jesus to lead us into a place of peace.

Of course, there's much more that could be said. Jesus calls us to be instruments of justice as well as peace.

Jesus calls us to be people of prayer.

And you know, I sometimes wish that Santa were more like Jesus. I wish that justice could be given as a free gift at no cost, just like forgiveness. I wish that Santa could give us peace at no cost, instead of us having to win peace by great effort.

But the truth is that those things we value most are the things we've had to fight for or work for.

Fortunately, we're not alone Jesus has been fighting for and working for the most important things for a long time.

Thanks be to God.

~~—— And somewhere in the midst of all that, there is a call to justice that Santa can never satisfy either.~~

~~—— There is a real cost in justice — in correcting something unfair, or even encouraging those who are correcting something unfair. No real positive social change has come without someone stepping out and saying: "This is wrong, we need to fix it."~~

~~—— And when someone steps out and says that, the critics and those who like the status quo line up in opposition.~~

~~—— Jesus stepped out in ca~~

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