

**SANTA CLAUS
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St. Andrew's United Methodist Church
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We start with a film clip from “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation.” Clark Griswold has managed to get himself trapped in the attic. As there’s no heat up here, Clark rummages through boxes of stuff to find something, anything, to layer him against the cold. In the course of the rummaging, he comes across a reel-to-reel projector and a box of old home movies, taking us to this scene:

I’ve been doing a lot of rummaging myself in recent months, sorting through stuff at home and the office in anticipation of retirement and relocation in June. Nancy and I have been through boxes unopened since our move from Springfield, Missouri, in 2005, coming across unwrapped wedding gifts from twenty-five years ago. Some of these will be up for bid in next weekend’s Holiday Market.

Perhaps the most poignant sorting through, for me personally, has been in the office, particularly the boxes of old sermon manuscripts. While everything preached the past twenty years is on various discs and flash drives, that still leaves about a quarter century of handwritten or manually typed documents to wade through.

While there’s plenty of forgettable material in these boxes, some have evoked memories akin to those that so affected Clark Griswold in the attic. I’ve never been one to recycle sermons, but this Christmas season, I’ll be dipping into my Greatest Hits, mostly for the sake of revisiting them myself, beginning today with what I remember as my first sermon to “chart”: SANTA CLAUS

As some have heard me say, I’d never preached a sermon anywhere under any circumstances before being appointed to

serve the five churches of the Pattonsburg Circuit in very rural northwest Missouri, June of 1974. I figured I would model my preaching after what I'd heard from the Reverend Richard Davis, aka my daddy. Richard Davis was a learned man, given to short, learned sermons, laced with poetic reference. The only poetry I knew was lyrics from three-minute records. Not being particularly learned, either, it didn't take long to realize I was going to have to chart my own course.

I remember I running the idea of the Santa Claus sermon past Reverend Davis: What do you think? He said it sounded stupid. That did give me pause. However. I had a paper due in seminary. I'm thinking the assignment was to write a Christmas sermon? If my 24-year old self was short on intellect, I would try to compensate with cleverness. (And have been doing so ever since.)

As I recall, SANTA CLAUS actually went over pretty well in Daviess County and I can document that it received thumbs up from the seminary, one of the professors noting, "The reference to Santa Claus would get attention and put the discussion on a level of common experience"; another also approving, with this comment, "It seemed that you came close to showing that God's gifts are unmerited (grace), but Santa is a works-righteousness gift—but you never quite spelled it out."

Forty-three years later, I intend in his hour, to "spell it out." Toward that end, I want to look much closer than I did at the time to my announced text, Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 21-31.

Some Bible Study: A few weeks ago, we were in Paul's letters to the church in Corinth, talking about his "collection for the saints." The original risk-taking missionary had been inviting the churches of Asia Minor and Greece to participate in a special offering to alleviate the suffering of the persecuted church in Jerusalem.

As Paul explains to the Romans: the Gentile believers of their region (in the Bible, everyone who's not a Jew is Gentile) had been spiritually blessed by the saints in Jerusalem; now it was the Gentiles turn to be of service to their Jewish brothers and sisters of the mother church in material things.

We quoted F.V. Filson in "The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible":

For Paul such aid was not only a work of mercy, but also a means by which the Jewish and Gentile Christians could be brought closer together in sympathy and friendship.

Having gathered the collection, it was on Paul's heart to deliver it to Jerusalem personally. He had no illusion of being greeted in a spirit of Radical Hospitality. Paul had once been an up-and-comer in the Jerusalem religious establishment. Having cast his lot with the Jesus people, the Temple Ayatollahs had branded him a heretic and traitor.

Paul seems to have had it in his head that his presence in the city might serve to disprove the haters. Never mind the fatwa: We're all one in Christ Jesus.

From the text itself, Paul seems to have been in Corinth, his bags packed for Jerusalem, when he wrote to the church in Rome. In the letter, he expresses regret that he was yet to visit the Imperial City, but planned on coming their way after this trip to Jerusalem--then proceeding onward to Spain. That was the plan...

I'm suspecting he wrote this letter when he did, on the chance he didn't get out of Jerusalem alive; wanting to give a word of instruction and encouragement to the believers in the belly of the Roman beast. If the gospel could make it there, it could make it anywhere.

Fast forward three hundred years. When the New Testament was being put together in the form we have received it, the 4th

century editors began with four narratives of the life and times of Jesus: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These were followed by Luke's sequel: the Acts of the Apostles, chronicling the spread of the gospel into Asia Minor and Greece. Next on the library shelf, the letters of Paul to the Gentile congregations. Of the 13 letters attributed to the apostle, the Epistle to the Romans was considered of such import that the editors ordered it first among his writings. Reading from Chapter 1, verse 1:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (*note, we're still in the first sentence*), through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Whew...

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The letter is off to an amiable start, but within a matter of verses, Paul goes off on the wrath of God, revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness. Romans 1 can be read as a laundry list of degrading passions associated with the Gentile world—sins of the flesh, Paul commenting, “those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.” Paul's righteous readers were surely stoked: You tell those sinners, Paul!

Chapter 2, however, starts with a 180 degree pivot:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge are doing the very same things...

Huh?

Whereas Romans Chapter 1 is about sins of the flesh, Chapter 2 is about sins of the heart, hardened to our brothers and sisters. You who would judge others, you think you're going to escape the judgement of God?

Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteousness judgment will be revealed.

Had not Jesus himself warned the self-styled righteous about seeing the speck in their neighbor's eye, while remaining oblivious to the log sticking out in their own? Sure, says Paul, the Gentiles have issues, but before you get in a toot about them, my brothers and sisters in Abraham, look in the mirror at your own self.

Remember how Paul got into this in the first place. To repeat: he'd been a gung ho member of the same religious establishment who had wanted Jesus dead for transgressions against the law of Moses. At least, that's what they said. Paul been on the team that stoned Stephen for his proclamation that this Jesus who was crucified had been raised and those who killed him would be judged. That meant Stephen had to die, too. Paul then set out for Damascus, to root out heresy in Syria, only to be felled by a vision of the risen Christ, "Why do you persecute me?"

Taking us to chapter 3, starting at verse 21, the passage chosen for SANTA CLAUS:

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (*Understand: The law of Moses is not the problem; the problem is how the religious establishment has perverted the law for its own self-interest*). For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

With that, I'd like to sing a little song. Last weekend, we did the announcements to the tune of "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town." We'll probably bring that back in a couple of weeks. Today, however, we're going to sing the song as arranged by Phil Spector, recorded by the Crystals, throwing in some Clarence Clemons saxophone per Bruce Springsteen's shows of the Christmas season. Let's hit it....

**You better watch out, you better not cry
You better not pout, I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
Santa Claus is coming to town
Santa Claus is coming to town**

**He's making a list, he's checking it twice
He's gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town
Santa Claus is coming to town
Santa Claus is coming to town**

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

**You better watch out, you better not cry
 You better not pout, I'm telling you why
 Santa Claus is coming to town
 Santa Claus is coming to town
 Santa Claus is coming to town**

Sax solo to verse progression

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

**You better watch out, you better not cry
 You better not pout, I'm telling you why
 Santa Claus is coming to town
 Santa Claus is coming to town
 Santa Claus is coming to town**

Thus spoke the Young & Fearless Prophet, December 22, 1974:

Who do we think of when we think of Christmas? We think about the baby Jesus, of course, about God the Father, we think about Mary and Joseph, the wise men and the shepards (*I misspelled shepherds; happily, 43 years later, I have spellcheck*), but we think of someone else as well. That someone is Santa Claus. Boys and girls will likely think about Santa above all others at Christmas, but that's o.k., because little ones can't understand the real meaning of Christmas. Unfortunately, there a lot of older people who don't understand the real meaning of Christmas either. They associate Christmas with light bulbs, office parties,

end of the year bills—everything but the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, I wouldn't want anyone to get the idea I'm criticizing Santa Claus—to the contrary—this jolly fellow from the north is an invaluable part of the Christmas spirit. In fact, someone at school last week remarked that God and Santa Claus have a lot in common. That seemed nonsensical to me at first, but for some reason the thought stuck in my mind and the more I thought about it, the more sense it made to me. God and Santa Claus do seem to have some things in common.

Let's think about Santa Claus for a moment. Every Christmas he flies in with his reindeer and leaves presents for all the boys and girls throughout the world. Well, not all the boys and girls. The song goes, "He's making a list, he's checking it twice, he's gonna find out who's naughty and nice, Santa Claus is coming to town." The song suggest that only good children will receive presents, naughty boys and girls will receive nothing.

My mother went even further. She informed me that Santa does bring gift wrapped boxes to bad children, but when they open the box, they find it filled with switches.

For modern-era parents, I should explain: Switches were employed to spank naughty fannies. Any spankings I got were surely well earned, though I suppose these days, my parents would have been jailed for child abuse.

As if this wasn't scary enough, Santa had the power of omnipotence. He saw me when I was sleeping, he knew when I was awake; he knew when I was bad and good, so I should be good for goodness sake." Truth be told, what motivation I had for being good was less for the sake of goodness itself than for the fear of kiddy hell: waking up on Christmas morn to find switches instead of present under the tree! Back to my report of 1974:

However, I've never received any switches, only gifts, and what wonderful gifts they have been—everything from baseball bats to bicycles—from cowboy pistols to model trains. I think that Santa Claus is a pretty great guy.

Santa Claus brings us gifts, but God bring us gifts as well—gifts of a different variety. Now God's gifts can't be found neatly wrapped under a tree, but they are gifts that are much greater than anything Santa can bring us, gifts such as good health, this beautiful world in which we live, our loved ones, peace of mind. In fact, it should be acknowledged that all we have is a gift of God.

Christmas is the time when we celebrate the greatest of the gifts that God has given us, a gift given in the spirit of perfect love, a gift for which we are undeserving. That gift is, of course, God's only son, Jesus Christ.

God gave us this gift for many reasons. He gave us the gift of his son so that we might be shown the right way to live in harmony with God's plan, so that we might turn away from our sin and hypocrisy and follow the path that God has chosen for us. God gave us this gift so that we might no longer be in darkness but be in light. He gave us the gift of his son because God loves us.

This season we celebrate the birth of the Son of God. Next spring, we will observe his death. It was through the death of his son that God gave us another gift, a gift of victory, a gift of life—the priceless treasure of salvation.

Now of all the gifts that God has given us, salvation may be the most controversial. Few would dispute that salvation is *available* to all persons--where the dispute comes in is to the question of who will and who will not ultimately receive the gift.

Some folks say that very few will receive salvation, some say it will only be those of a certain denomination, some say the gift is only given to those who believe in certain political

ideologies. (*I'm kind of surprised to see myself including that in 1974, but it had been year of Watergate, and there were a political divisions in that time, too.*) Some believe that that the gift can be earned either by faith or works—others believe that salvation is preordained.

This is a question that has been tossed around by theologians for centuries and whatever your opinion may be concerning this, I can assure you that it is probably as good as anyone else's, including those opinions of some of the most brilliant theologians.

One of the St. Paul profs inserted this comment: "Haven't you overplayed this a bit?" But then, he was himself a professional theologian, so we move on...

I'm not sure how God determines who will and who will not receive the gift of salvation, but I think that it might most interesting to look for a moment at the way in which Santa Claus determines who will and who will not receive gifts on Christmas morning.

Remember the words to the song again, "He's making a list, he's checking it twice, he's gonna find out who's naughty and nice." I must confess to you this hour that I did a lot of bad things when I was a little boy. Sometimes I disobeyed my parents, I was a real show-off (glad I grew out of that!), and I fought with my little sister almost constantly. There were several Christmases when my parents told me not to be surprised if I opened my package under the tree and found it filled with switches. But you know, if never happened. I always received presents—even my rotten little sister always received presents. Santa seemed to realize that kids are kids and just aren't capable of being nice all the time.

Yet, I imagine that if I never shown any gratitude for the gifts that Santa left me, if I had broken and smashed the gifts, I

probably would have someday received that box of switches that my mother warned me about.

Yet, isn't that exactly what we have done to the gifts that God has given us? God has given us the gift of a beautiful environment, with blue skies and clear oceans—we are in the process of tearing that gift apart—polluting the sky, pouring our waste and sewage into the seas. God has given us the gift of love and yet we so often hate. God has given us the gifts of time, our own natural talents and abilities, yet so often we waste these gifts. God has given us the gift of the holy law, which, in many cases, we ignore. God has given us all that we have, yet we seldom take time to say thanks. God gave us the gift of his son and we crucified him.

It should surprise no one, indeed it would seem logical and reasonable in light of the way that mankind has collectively abused the gifts that God has given us, that God would have long ago washed his hands of the human race and condemned us to an eternity of switches.

The profs particularly liked this next part:

Yet, like the naughty little boy who wakes up on Christmas morning to find a shiny new bicycle under the tree, mankind continues to receive presents from God. In spite of all our disobedience and lack of true repentance, God still offers us the priceless gift of salvation. This can only be explained in terms of perfect love—in terms of amazing grace. This is what Paul was talking about in the letter to the Roman when he wrote,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,

they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is Jesus Christ.

This is the Good News of the New Testament.

This year, as we open the gifts that have been left under Christmas tree, let us take time to thank God for the greatest of all gifts, remembering the words from the gospel of John, 'For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.' No greater gift could ever be given.