

“THE SANTA WORKSHOP”

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Today is really a workshop around how to sit with other people who disagree with you... How to just BE in the tension around you...

- Because that’s exactly what I am going to create!

Santa is a controversial topic... I always hear curious rumblings this time of year among Christians that letting children believe in Santa is wrong.

- That giving children a myth implies that the Nativity story is insufficient.
- That letting them believe that good behavior earns gifts makes them greedy or legalistic.
- That belief in Santa means bowing to materialism and all things plastic.
- Even that the name Santa is an anagram for Satan...

“Santa comes from the Latin Sanctus, meaning holy or saint.”

- This was evolved from a man, St Nicholas - Bishop of Myra, which we will learn about in a moment...

On the other hand, many families, Christian or not, are very comfortable promoting a fanciful figure...

- After all, there's only a brief period in a child's life when she is able to believe the unbelievable with complete abandon.
- When asked... “What happens when they discover the truth?”
- One mom said... “After discussing my ‘Santa concerns’ with friends, I realized something I overlooked – one that allowed my children their imagination while keeping Christ at the center of Christmas. My friends presented Santa as fiction in the first place. One friend said it this way, [My children] don’t think of Santa as anything different from Big Bird or Mickey Mouse.”

So, now that a bit of tension has been properly “stewed” ...Let’s learn about the Origins of Santa Claus...

- As with many things in our culture, Santa has his beginnings in a Christian past.
- Santa is rooted in the real Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, dating to the fourth century. *Orphaned as a young teen, Nicholas found comfort in his faith and religious studies. Nicholas, ordained as a priest at age 19, became Bishop of Myra shortly thereafter. Nicholas was imprisoned from 303 A.D. to 308 A.D. because he wouldn't worship Roman emperor Diocletian as a god. He also encouraged his fellow prisoners to remain steadfast in their faith. Bishop Nicholas was primarily known for his kindness, generosity, and wisdom. Nicholas inherited a large amount of money and used much of his fortune to help the poor. Nicholas gave freely to meet the needs of people around him, fulfilling the commands of Christ to aid the poor.*
- After his death, the Catholic Church recognized him as a saint—hence the common American usage of St. Nick as a substitute for Santa. The red clothing is likely founded in the red robes worn by bishops.

Though Nicholas is not the reason for the season, the celebration of his memory played a key role in today's Christmas traditions.

- Communities celebrated Nicholas' memory every December 6, the anniversary of his death. In the 16th century, Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians perpetuated his memory by including St. Nicholas festivities in their Christmas traditions.
- It wasn't until 1870, however, that Christmas was adopted as an official lesson plan in Protestant churches.
- As part of the lesson, Sunday School teachers dressed up as Santa to hand out presents as an outreach to children who didn't normally attend.

Historians credit Nicholas for turning Christmas into a gift-giving season.

- Every year on December 6th, people celebrated his memory by re-enacting tales attributed to Nicholas...
- One re-enactment included hanging stockings over the fireplace and filling them with gifts in remembrance of the time Nicholas saved a widower from selling his daughters into slavery. Legend says Nicholas snuck into their home and filled their stockings that hung over the fireplace to dry with gold coins.
- Additionally, entire communities participated in the festivities by giving gifts to one another...
- The white beard and other trappings (e.g., reindeer, sleighs, elves, etc.) are likely adopted from various cultural influences being mingled together over the centuries... Much like Christmas Trees!

The well-known mythical Santa is clearly founded in a man who honored Jesus Christ with his life and his possessions.

- Nicholas gave freely of his riches to benefit those who were less fortunate no matter who they were.
- This is clearly a fundamental Christian principle, as we see care for the poor proclaimed throughout Scripture...(Vs) James 2:1-4, 8-9 – “My brothers, show no partiality...”
- This is the message the original St. Nicholas would have communicated.

While Santa is not a Christ figure—that must be clear!—the Santa myth is not the problem...

- The problem is that we have let advertisers hijack Santa, turning Christmas into a retail event...Leading many children to believe that their wish list is a demand list.
- In the end... “Today's Santa is a mixture of fact and legend about Nicholas, religious traditions around the world, and the imagination of writers and advertisers.”
- And so, perhaps teaching children about the myth of Santa Claus does not have to conflict with teaching them about Jesus.

“Some stories, such as fables and parables, are not empirically true, but they are true in that they point to realities about God's world and the human condition.”

- In this sense, like many symbols, Santa Claus can embody Christian values such as kindness, generosity, forgiveness—every child soon realizes that even if they have not been perfect all year, Santa comes through.
- And so, continuing in the tension, what if instead, allowing children to embrace Santa while they are young can allow them to experience unmerited favor (grace)?
- Then as they grow, we as adults can point to that experience in order to explain what it means to give and receive grace.

C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest storytellers of the 20th century, dedicated the Chronicles of Narnia to his goddaughter Lucy Barfield...

“In the dedication, he noted that "girls grow quicker than books. As a result, you are already too old for fairy tales But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again."

- Many of us have grown too old for fairy tales, yet not matured enough to understand them as adults.

Question: What if we steal something precious from our children when we deny them the opportunity to believe in fairy tales, and to learn how to glean truth from a made-up story...

- Perhaps believing, for a little while, allows them to later understand symbolism and metaphor?

Remember: “Myths, after all, are time-honored methods of communicating truth through story, and the Santa Claus myth is no exception.”

C.S. Lewis (who, by the way, included Father Christmas in one of his Narnia books) often corresponded with readers...

- One youngster, 9-year-old Laurence Krieg, confessed to his mother that he might love Aslan the Lion more than he loved Jesus, and felt guilty about this. His mother wrote to the publisher, and Lewis himself responded in less than two weeks.
“Tell Laurence from me, with my love,” Lewis wrote, “ ... [He] can't really love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before ... I don't think he need be bothered at all.”
- Lewis's answer is brilliant. God made our imaginations and hardwired us to connect deeply with stories.
- In this way, perhaps parents can use the Santa myth to teach their children to be giving rather than demanding, and to experience generosity and grace.

(Vs) Colossians 1:16 – *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”*