

If Santa Kept His List Right, His Sleigh Would Be Empty

Hebrews 10:11-18

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

First Sunday in Advent, November 28, 2010

I've heard it said that people's beliefs are often shaped more by the songs they sing than by all the sermons they hear. The title of today's sermon is taken from a song that has shaped the way many people think about Christmas. I'm going to sing a couple of verses for you now:

O, you'd better watch out; you'd better not cry;
You'd better not pout: I'm telling you why.
Santa Claus is coming to town.

He's making a list, checking it twice,
Gonna find out who's naughty or nice,
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....

I have a vague memory from my childhood of singing this song and being disturbed by it. Each year, I wondered if this was going to be the year that I would be found out. I knew that I had done plenty of things that would put me on Santa's "Naughty" list, knowing that I had done my share of bad things, but up to that point I'd always managed to avoid getting caught because on Christmas morning—lo and behold—there were some presents under the tree for me. I remember a sense of apprehension as Christmas approached wondering if this would be the year that I would get the nothing that I knew I deserved.

It was clear that this was the way Santa worked: if you're good, you get presents; if you're bad, nothing. "So be good, for goodness sake." In those days leading up to Christmas, I'd make a conscious effort to try to be good enough for Santa, but even then I'd still get in fights with my brother and tease my sister and shirk on the chores my parents expected me to do. As good as I wanted to be, I just couldn't make it all the way. And I couldn't help but wonder if this would be the year that there would be no presents for me under the tree.

This is the picture that many people have of Santa Claus...and it is also the picture that many people have of God. Some people picture God up in heaven with the divine clip board, looking down and taking notes about our behavior. And if you're good enough, then when you die, you get to go to heaven. But if you have more marks on the "naughty" side of your ledger, then when you die, well....

Now this picture of God is nothing new. In fact, it is this very picture of God that the writer of Hebrews is addressing in the scripture that I've just read. There were people

who thought that what saved them was their religious observance—that if they offered the right prayers, presented the correct sacrifices, strictly followed the Old Testament law, then God would be obligated to save them because they deserved it.

The writer pictures the priest going day after day to the altar to offer sacrifices to God, hoping that the sacrifice will be pleasing enough to God that God will look down on them with favor.

They believed that they could win God's favor if they just did enough good deeds.

Take the Pharisees for example. For us today Pharisees have been victimized by a lot of bad press. We think of them as people who were religious in a hollow, meaningless sort of way. They have become synonymous with "hypocrite." But that's not exactly the case. One person said, "The Pharisees were puritans in the best sense of the word: generous to the poor, ardently patriotic, honest to a fault" (George Buttrick). And another said,

Like the early Puritans of this country, the Pharisees were a sturdy breed. Their faith in God was unquestioned and unshakable. Their devotion to the scriptures and constant effort to relate them to daily life put most of us to shame. Their zeal for church-going and for prayer was matched only by their zeal to live a godly life. They quoted the golden rule, too, and did their level best to live by it (Edmund Steimle).

In short, the Pharisees lived very virtuous and upright lives. So why have they gotten all the bad press? Because they thought it was through their own goodness and virtue that they earned salvation.

Before he heard the truth about God's grace, Martin Luther also suffered from this mis-belief. As a young man, his search for inner peace led him to a monastery where he became a model monk. Looking back on that time in his life, he wrote,

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.

There were times when Luther was proud of his virtue and good works, and would say, "I have done nothing wrong today." But then misgivings would arise: "Have I fasted enough? Am I poor enough?" These questions tortured him until eventually he came to hate God who demanded more than a person could give.

That is where this kind of works righteousness always ends: hating God for demanding more than is humanly possible and despair for our inability to reach God's unreachable standards. No matter how many good deeds we do, we always come up short. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." No matter how many sacrifices we offer, no matter how often we attend church, no matter how much we give to charity, no matter how many kind deeds we do, we could always do more, and more still, until we finally throw up our hands in despair. No matter how hard we try, on our own we can never make it.

If God is up in heaven with the divine clipboard, keeping track of our good deeds and our bad deeds, we may as well forget about the possibility of heaven because none of us will ever make it.

It's just like the song: if Santa Claus is keeping his list right, his sleigh will be empty, and we will all wake up to a bare Christmas tree.

But, thanks be to God, God is not up in heaven keeping a tally of our good and bad deeds. We ourselves can never do enough, but what we cannot do for ourselves, Jesus has already done for us.

As the writer of Hebrews says, "When Christ offered once for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since then has been waiting until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died—not for the righteous—but for a bunch of sinners like you and me. As the prophet Isaiah said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow."

Let us celebrate with joy and wonder and thanksgiving the gracious love of God.
Amen. ☩