

“Prettifying Christmas”

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

Circuit Rider is a United Methodist magazine, a periodical, especially designed for United Methodist clergy. A number of years ago they held a sermon contest, and announced awards for best Advent-Christmas sermon. To be truthful, I have a bit of a problem with a “best sermon contest”. Any given sermon may speak to one person, but not to another. I have found in my preaching that some sermons I can hardly wait to preach because I think it’s a really good sermon, but it may fall flat; others, I don’t really care for the sermon after I’ve prepared it, and I half dread having to inflict it on a congregation, but discover that God uses it to really bless someone, or speak directly to their needs.

But having said all that, I read the sermon that won first prize in that contest, and I liked it! The sermon title was “A Scruffy Old Stable”, by a United Methodist pastor named Michael Macdonald.

He told of the time between college and seminary when he was asked to serve for 9 months as interim pastor on a four-point charge out in the boon docks of western Arkansas. He says that during that time he learned a lot about being a pastor, and he also learned a lot about Christmas.

As Advent neared, he found out one of the cherished traditions of the Hatfield Church was to put up a nativity scene near the highway. Actually, it was put up in front of the parsonage. One crisp afternoon a parishioner, Bobby Lane, drove up to put up the crèche. “After amusing himself by watching the city-boy preacher try to pretend that he was an old hand with a post-hole digger, Bobby and his son quickly banged together some old boards to make the stable. Now these boards looked as though they had been near some paint back in 1945 and then used for bleachers at the ballpark ever since. Later on some of the other members brought the figurines to place in our hastily assembled stable.”

The next day Pastor Macdonald got a phone call from a family who lived about a half-mile down the highway. Would he please stop and see them right away. They had something important they needed to talk over with him. Shortly afterwards he was dealing with his first official case of “offended parishioners.” The nativity scene was a disgrace. The old boards looked shabby and tacky. It made the whole church look bad. It needed paint, and if the church couldn’t afford a bucket of paint this family would be glad to buy it. Then they demanded that the pastor bring it up Sunday night at the Administrative Council meeting.

So he did. He shared how he also thought it would be a good idea to spruce up the nativity scene a bit. But “the people of Hatfield United Methodist church let me know in a loving but very firm manner that no, it was not at all a good idea to prettify our stable. Bobby’s mother Lucille put it best: ‘Do you think the stable Jesus was born in was all nice and prettily painted? Isn’t that the whole point: Christ was born in a smelly, broken down, scruffy old stable? It wasn’t pretty at all!’ So that year, Hatfield’s baby Jesus was born in what looked like a smelly, broken down, scruffy old stable that wasn’t one bit pretty.”

Pastor Macdonald then writes: “For me, this little incident at Hatfield has become a parable about Christmas today. It seems to me that we have ‘prettified’ Christmas until we have forgotten what really happened to a young, frightened couple in a scruffy old stable a long way from home.”

What do you think? Do we “prettify Christmas”? I think in some ways we do. ***We prettify Christmas when we insist it has to be a happy time.*** “It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” we sing. “Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la, la la la la.” Everybody’s smiling and happy and feeling a warm glow during the holidays. *Except they’re not.*

Now I love the Christmas season. There is almost magic in the good will that exists for a brief time on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. But it’s also a time when human pain and sadness is amplified. For some people, the Christmas holidays are the worst time of the year: for those far away from home, for the terminally ill, for those going through a separation or divorce, for those in prisons and their families, for those short on money or out of work, for overworked store clerks and deliver people. Christmas is especially difficult for those who have recently lost a loved one. A pastor I know told me that his father died on Christmas Eve, and each year on Christmas Eve there is a tinge of sadness because of that.

We often have this unrealistic expectation that everyone should be super happy at Christmas, and there’s something wrong if we aren’t. But maybe we just have to say: Enjoy the warmth and the good will of the season, but also accept the loneliness or sadness or pain if it’s there. Remember, that first Christmas, Joseph and Mary were no doubt an anxious, scared young couple having their first baby, far away from home. Then too, ***we prettify Christmas when we make it all about gift giving and warm celebrations.*** Not that these things are bad...but...

Of course, there is the commercialization of Christmas. In that prize-winning sermon, Pastor Macdonald writes: “I am afraid we may have already lost that battle. I decided this when I saw Christmas decorations in the stores two weeks before Halloween and heard an advertisement on the radio for hiring a Santa Claus ‘fantasy stripper’ for Christmas office parties...we think we can improve on Christmas by making it profitable and in the end we haven’t the slightest idea of what the day is all about.” His sermon was written some years ago. And if the battle against commercializing Christmas was lost then, it’s certainly not been won since then, has it? The smelly feeding trough (manger) where Jesus was laid has little similarity to the polished advertisements and indulgent spending associated with Christmas today.

We can also prettify Christmas by making it all about holiday festivities. After serving as a pastor for some years I took a year out of pastoral ministry and worked in a bank. We had an office Christmas party. For some, the goal seemed to be to do some drinking then see how loud and uninhibited you could become!

One year shortly before Christmas Day I spoke at a Christmas service in a life care facility. The local high school 9th and 10th grade chorus was also there to sing. Two young ladies had solo parts in “O Holy Night”. One had finished her verse, and the other had just begun. At that point

one lady in the audience got up, and started to walk from row to row, talking out loud, hugging people, wishing them a Merry Christmas, saying she had to go, a relative was coming to pick her up. All the while, the young girl in the chorus was singing: “O holy night, it is the night of our dear Savior’s birth.” I felt so badly for her. For me, that incident has become a parable of how we can get caught up in our holiday festivities and socializing and miss the angels singing, “It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth”.

We can prettify Christmas when it becomes a secular holiday, all about us. I like what Michael Slaughter says, “Remember, it’s *His* birthday, not yours!”

Then too, we prettify Christmas when our traditions become more important than the Christ event itself. Christmas traditions can be beautiful and meaningful – family traditions, community traditions, congregational traditions. However, sometimes these traditions become more important than *the Event* these traditions point to.

One year in a church I was serving, the Sunday before Christmas, we had a traditional Sunday School program, where we read the Christmas narrative from Matthew. That year I decided to read it from the Good News Version of the Bible. In that translation, Matthew 1:22-25 reads like this: “Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God is with us’). So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus.”

Well, a few women became enraged, because this translation said, “he had no *sexual relations* with her”! You might remember in the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version that it says “but knew her not”. What’s that mean? Joseph didn’t know Mary? Of course he did! But “knew” here means intimacy, that they didn’t have sexual intercourse. Well, such a fuss after this Sunday School program, and I was in the middle! I was hardly in any frame of mind to preach at the worship service which followed! We can “prettify” the Christmas story when we treat Joseph and Mary as figurines in a manger display rather than the real true to life people they were.

I remember the one Christmas Eve where instead of singing “Silent Night” as we lit the candles, we sang a different hymn. Did I ever get flak on that! One person complained that we didn’t even sing Silent Night, *but we did*. It just wasn’t during the lighting of the candles. We can prettify Christmas if we worship the tradition of singing Silent Night during the lighting of the candles more than we worship the Christ who is the Light of the world!

Christmas traditions can be valuable and meaningful. But let’s not make them so rigid and revered that they keep us from new ways of understanding and celebrating the birth of Jesus!

One more thought on how we can “prettify Christmas”: ***We prettify Christmas when we sentimentalize its “real meaning”.*** One Christmas morning, when I was still single and serving

a church away from my home, I drove back to my parents' home for our family Christmas dinner. On the way I was listening to the radio. One radio station played Christmas music, and instead of the normal ads and commercials, different sponsors gave a brief Christmas message. There were a lot of thoughts expressed about the "real meaning of Christmas" – love, peace on earth, the good will, the excitement of children, etc. This was nice. Heaven knows we need good will in this world. But many of these Christmas thoughts didn't even mention Jesus or His birth.

Someone has said, "People want to improve Christmas by making its significance so broad, so general, and so inoffensive that all Americans will want to celebrate the holy day – (whether they be) Christian, Jew, Hindu or atheist." We can "prettify" Christmas so it appeals to everyone. But the Bible says, "For to you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior* who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). The bottom line: We need a Savior today just as badly as any generation that's ever lived. And the good news of Christmas is that a *Savior* has been born to save us *and all people* from our sins!

We can sentimentalize Christmas when we focus on the baby Jesus and forget the Man. Most people like babies! I can't imagine how babies can offend anyone! It's easy to be sentimental about shepherds, angels, and a sweet little newborn baby. But Jesus grew up to be a Man. And not everybody liked Him or welcomed Him.

Jesus was not just a nice man! (If you doubt that, read Matthew, chapter 23, and His biting words against the religious leaders of the day). Jesus embodied God's Truth – and Truth sometimes hurts and offends. The gospel story takes us from the *cradle* to the *cross*, from *Christmas* to *Calvary*. This "sweet baby Jesus" grew up to be a Man who was despised and rejected and nailed to a cross, and called us to take up *our cross* of obedience and follow Him.

During the civil rights movement a national magazine ran a story which featured the pastor of a Methodist church in Mississippi. The schools were beginning to desegregate and there was hate and hostility in many communities. One morning this pastor went to the school his children attended, and he saw big, grown men with clubs running after tiny black children to beat them. And he says, "Where is the church? On Christmas, everyone loves the baby Jesus. It's no problem to love the baby Jesus. But the baby grew up, and we don't want to go with Him the rest of the way, to the Upper Room, or Gethsemane, or a crucifixion on Calvary." He goes on to say how Christ demands a faith that is active in *every* phase of our life.

It is so easy in our culture to "prettify Christmas" because of what Christmas has become, with all its trappings. But you don't have to have all of the stuff we associate with Christmas to get to the heart of Christmas.

In 1944, there were 64 women held by the Nazis in a small stable in Ludenburg, Germany. Two of these women (a mother and daughter) were Christians. The rest were Jews. The daughter writes that, as Christmas approached, her mother decided to do something to celebrate the holiday. On Advent Sunday, the mother said, "We're going to have a Christmas tree". She

outlined her plan – they’d have to do it in secret.

Christmas Eve, the other women watched as this mother and daughter pulled out a strange collection of items they had hidden to make the Christmas tree. A long pole...small snippets of pine branches they had pulled from scraggly trees thrown in the wood pile...an empty tin can cut apart and shaped into a star. For decorations, bows were made from colored yarn and scraps of paper; candles, secretly sliced off lanterns that were in the pig sty.

As the candles were lit on the tree and the women gathered around, the one Christian lady took out her New Testament and read aloud the Christmas story, then softly the women sang carols. Suddenly the door swung open and the prison officer entered. “What is this?” he roughly demanded. “It’s Christmas Eve. We are celebrating the Holy Evening.” “You Jews?” he asked. “My daughter and I are Christians.” “You’re no different; you have Jewish blood.” “So did the first Christians,” the mother replied. “Christianity is a matter of faith, not race.” Furiously the guard grabbed the tree, tore it apart, and threw its remains in the corner. Then he stomped out, shutting off the light.

Later, this girl writes, she stretched out her hand to her mother’s hand searching from the bunk below. The mother whispered, ‘We had our Christmas.’”

I think we all realize, don’t we, that Christmas is more than all the baggage and trappings associated with the observance of Christmas in our culture.

I like how Pastor Macdonald ended his sermon: “It is when we try to prettify Christmas that we cover up its true beauty...the gift buying, platitudes and nostalgia need to be stripped away, for the true beauty of Christmas is waiting to be rediscovered: the Son of God has come to bring God’s love and healing to this broken world and our broken lives. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.”

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