

Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas Day
December 27, 2009
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Emmanuel Episcopal Church

How many of you have ever said “I wish Christmas could last all year”? Well, how about just 12 days?

On Friday morning, I was sitting in the lounge chair. I was covered with wrapping paper, ribbon, tape and packing peanuts. I had a big bow stuck to my head, and a bottle of....juice in my hand. The youngest dog was attired similarly (minus the juice) and asleep in my lap.... It was 2 am Christmas morning. Having received some truly fabulous and thoughtful gifts, I was surprised to hear my father say as clearly as if he were in the room:

“It’s all over but the cryin’ now”! My dad used to say that after all the gifts were opened! In his own wry way, he understood the let down that often follows the hype that proceeds Christmas. When my brother and I were really young, my parents had a stroke of genius. My mother, always a great debater and one who could think on her feet, even managed a good theological argument for her genius. My parents decided that given all the work they put in to Christmas for us, it wasn’t right that it should only last 20 minutes. Our tree was decorated by Santa on Christmas Eve when he stopped in the drop off our gifts. Now, I understand that if the tree were to be decorated before then, we would have insisted on helping and then it would be like....well, like we had decorated it and my mother was rather particular about that. Even when in high school and college, the tree was decorated by Santa. Christmas Eve was a very busy night at our house before Santa arrived. Somewhere around the time we were 7 and 5 my parents realized they could have 12 days of absolute peace and harmony, and total control of us. So they started spreading out our gifts over the 12 days of Christmas! We received our “big” gift on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6th! Those gifts sat there under the tree, taunting us for 12 days. We weren’t even allowed into the living room until after dinner each evening. The worst was the last few days. The anticipation of the last gift was nearly unbearable. Each night we went to sleep dreaming about what it might be from the 4 page list we had mailed to Santa.

For twelve days nothing could be heard at our house except “yes, please”, “thank you so much”, and “I’d be happy to clean the bathroom, mother dearest”. We, in the words of St. Paul, stove to “outdo each other in kindness”. It was mildly nauseating. My parents had to but glance in our direction, with a certain look: a raised eyebrow and a tilt of the head, to control us. That look said it all. We knew it was their way or nothing! But, one of the great things about their masterful plan was that for a few years, Christmas really did last 12 days! I remember being surprised when my friends told me they had taken their tree down the day after Christmas.

You know, we Christians have chosen a counter-cultural lifestyle. We have chosen to follow one who teaches that might and power are best displayed in compassion and kindness. We have chosen to try to be like one who gave his life for people he never met; for people who were not even born yet. We could, as followers of one who teaches a rule of loving others as much as we love ourselves, choose to make Christmas last 12 days every year. As parents, we want our children to have the best. We want to see the look of delight when they open a special gift. But don’t we also want them to learn humility, gratitude and graciousness? We can hardly complain about them being ungrateful, entitled and selfish when the day they have been looking forward to all year, is over in 20 minutes? It isn’t even a whole day!

In the church, Sunday is considered a feast day, a remembrance of the Resurrection. That is why when we fast in Lent, some folks consider they can suspend their fast on Sunday. Today is the first time this year we will have the chance to make Christmas last. Today, we will put Christmas and Easter together, here at the table. Today, for the first time, we will see the birth of Jesus as

the beginning of the story we re-tell through the course of the liturgical year. The story we will re-tell each week tells both the beginning and the ending and displays the meaning in a simple act of sharing a meal. Each Sunday, we have the chance to make Christmas last, all year.

We celebrate "God With Us," the one who came and walked among us to teach us how to live in this world. For us here at this church, we could celebrate this every time we say the name of our church, Emmanuel. Keeping this in mind reminds us to look more closely at our world and see it as the world into which Jesus himself was born. The world really hasn't changed very much since his birth. It is a world full of greed, hostility, violence, poverty and strife. We see it, we know, we feel it and yet we feel helpless to stop it. Our world today, as much as at any time in history is in need of transformation. It is a world that cries out for salvation. We are a people that long for connection. And yet, we find ourselves more and more isolated from each other and from our inner selves. We live in a world that is clinging to hope and the promise of salvation that comes from faith in Christ, and sometimes it feels as though we are powerless to "be the change we wish to see". But, precisely because of our faith, we do have much to offer to the world today. We do have the ability to make Christmas last. The question is, will we do it? Will we pay as much attention to the gifts of the spirit as we will to the ones that came wrapped in pretty wrapping paper?

On this, the first day of celebration, we are reminded that being a follower of Christ has never has been simple or easy. Going against the flow, choosing to be different goes against human nature. It has always struck me that we Americans pride ourselves on our rugged individualism, and yet we find it so hard to go against popular culture. And the folks that do go against it? We think they are a little nutty! We look at folks like the Amish and the Quakers and think, "Isn't that quaint". But I doubt any of us long to live as they do without electricity, indoor facilities and many of our other modern conveniences. I doubt many of you women look at their style of dress and say "oooh, I want a cute little outfit like that"! I doubt you men look at them and say, "Wow, I sure would like to plow a two acre field with a hand plow and mule, at 4am!" And yet, they are choosing to go against popular culture. They are choosing to be followers in a way that makes sense to them, and that makes them stand out. For that, I admire them. But I, like you though, do not wish to live without my modern conveniences. So what can I do to be a follower? How can I go against the grain? Well, just behaving like a Christian seems to be challenge enough for me! Treating people with kindness and compassion, seeing the face of Christ in each other, wanting to serve others challenges me (and beats me I might add) 24/7.

Just wanting to be like Jesus in temperament alone is more than I can handle much of the time. I did pretty well on Christmas Day though!. I said please and thank you all day. I cleaned up my mess. I dried and put away all the dishes. That is "Jesus- like" isn't it? Ok...well it's a start.

Christian behavior isn't usually about being polite though, is it? It is often more about being a burr under the saddle or the pebble in the shoe of modern culture. It is often about having our heart in the right place. And sometimes people will look at us as though we are nutty! Just as Jesus challenged the conventional wisdom of the day, we are called to do the same. Just as Jesus challenged the religious and moral precepts of the day, we are challenged to do the same today. And not just in our own part of the world. We are called to be compassionate to those less fortunate than ourselves. Most often we think of those who live in poverty, but "less fortunate" can mean many things. It can mean more than lack of money, or education. It can mean addiction, family dysfunction, abuse, selfishness and greed. All of these are symptoms of something missing....and therefore less fortune.

We sometimes go to "less fortunate countries" not with an air of superiority of "look what we can offer you" but with a humility that stems from an awareness that we are called to be compassionate to those who suffer in anyway. What we most often discover is that those "less fortunate" often possess something we have lost, be it a strong extended family, a sense of

community or the joys of a simple existence. That is the perfect scenario when we find in each other something that we need. We can also learn from them how to do a better job of sharing the power of faith right here at home. When we are able to share with each another, we realize that our gifts come not from our wealth but out of our own poverty and that in turn allows us to recognize the Giver of everything we have. As our missionaries prepare for their trip to Belize, we pray that they will discover their own need as well as the needs of others, and return to us with a richer understanding of faith that they can share with us.

And so friends, as we proceed through the twelve days of Christmas, I challenge you to make Christmas last these twelve days and beyond. I challenge you to come to the table each Sunday with a grateful heart for the birth of Christ and leave knowing that you are choosing to swim upstream, against the current. I challenge you to be courageous and to wear your faith as comfortably as you wear your own clothing. Let us pray we not forget that each Sunday when we return to the table that we are returning for strength and renewal as much as for comfort and pardon, and that we share in our poverty as much as we share from our wealth. We are a nutty bunch, but our heart is in the right place!

AMEN

11am

In a few moments we are going to welcome into the family of Christ, Evelyn Vera Guy. What example shall we set for her? What will she learn from us? We promise, with God's help to follow the teachings of Christ, to turn away from evil and return to God, to treat every human being with dignity. Not just one day of the year, or even 12 days, but every moment of every day. We know that we will fall short. How we deal with those times is as important a lesson for her as in how we attempt to accomplish those promises. Let us pray we not forget that each Sunday when we return to the table that we are returning for strength and renewal as much as for comfort and pardon, and that we share in our poverty as much as we share from our wealth. Welcome to the family Evelyn Vera. We are a nutty bunch, but our heart is in the right place!