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## Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas was born in what is modern-day Turkey around 270 BC. There are a lot of stories about him, but most of them are probably fictitious, created many years after he died. It is probably true, however, that his parents died when he was fairly young, that he grew up to become a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and that he was known for his generosity to the poor and his work of freeing slaves.

When Nicholas was born, Christianity was a forbidden religion, but during his lifetime, under the decree of Emperor Constantine, Christianity, along with several other religions, was made legal and quickly became the preferred religion of the Empire. The council of Nicea occurred during Nicholas' lifetime, and it was at that council that the Nicene Creed was written in response to the heretic, Arius, who said that Jesus was not fully God. Rumour has it that Nicholas attended the Council and when a supporter of Arius became a little too obnoxious, Nicholas slapped him. This last story may not be true, but no one knows for certain.

Over the years, Nicholas was adopted as the patron saint in a number of places around Europe and Asia and eventually was given a special place in the Christian lore of the Dutch of northern Europe. On December 6 (or the evening of December 5), the Dutch have the tradition of celebrating Sinterklaas (named after Saint Nicholas), and they do so by giving gifts to each other, but especially to children. It is believed that Saint Nicholas gave gifts to the poor by throwing small bags of coins through their windows, and those bags would often land near the shoes and socks that had been put out to dry, leading to the tradition of the Dutch putting out their shoes to receive gifts as part of the celebration of Sinterklaas.

When the first Dutch immigrants came to North America in the early 1600s, they brought with them some of the traditions of home. They continued to celebrate Sinterklaas, and gradually their celebrations were enfolded into the growing American culture. Because non-Dutch speaking people didn't fully understand the Dutch word, Sinterklaas, they heard it as Santa Claus, and thus the North American figure was born. His image was popularized by Coca Cola in 1931 when they commissioned an artist to depict him in a heartwarming holiday ad. The picture we have in our minds of Santa Claus looks nothing like the real Saint Nicholas, and he acts nothing like him either.

In fact, Santa Claus bears very little resemblance to the original Saint Nicholas in other ways, particularly in his attitude toward children. Saint Nicholas had a soft spot in his heart for poor children, and he sought to alleviate some of the impact of their poverty by secretly giving them gifts. This was an act of pure grace, for while Nicholas had no obligation to help the children, he did so anyway. Santa Claus also gives gifts to children, but his gifts are not based on need but, rather, on merit. Good boys and girls receive gifts, but bad boys and girls get nothing except, perhaps, a lump of coal, although I suspect none of us have heard of this actually happening. There is no grace in Santa Claus, for one must earn his gifts by being good.

Teaching their children about Santa Claus gives parents good opportunity to coerce their children into good behaviour by telling them that Santa won't come unless they behave themselves. For almost an entire month, parents can resort to coercive tactics to teach their progeny to behave. Lest their children

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not take them seriously, some parents have resorted to hiding in plain site an elf, called an “elf on the shelf” who watches the children on behalf of Santa. That elf is placed in a new place each morning and acts as a sort of a nanny cam with a direct line to Santa’s workshop so Santa can make sure his list contains the names of only the good little boys and girls. This elf on the shelf is an effective method that parents can use to ensure that their children behave.

The story of Santa Claus is not about grace; it’s about merit. Only those who merit a gift will receive it. This is also a tactic which has been used by the Christian church over the years. In times when there was only one church in Europe, church leaders created an opportunity to use thuggery to get the people to do what they wanted them to do. By threatening excommunication from the church, church leaders could banish people to the eternal fires of hell. Threat of punishment is an effective way to evoke desired behaviour. Further, by telling people that they could escape an extended torturous existence in purgatory, a place where all people are “purged” of their sins, if they gave money to support cathedral building projects, the church was able to coerce people to give generously. By removing grace and replacing it with merit, the church was able to get people to act as the church desired them to act.

But that is not the gospel. While some evangelistic methods resort to coercive tactics (believe or you’ll go to hell), proper evangelism focuses on the message of grace wherein sinful people who have done nothing to deserve eternal life receive it because of the grace of Jesus Christ who gave his life on our behalf. Proper evangelism doesn’t scare people out of hell; it invites them to experience God’s grace. Proper evangelism does not reflect Santa Claus. Rather, a faithful presentation of the gospel reaches out to people who are sinners with the news that God has a gift to give them, a gift they did not deserve or earn.

That is why it is so important to keep Christ in Christmas. Santa Claus might seem like a jolly old fellow, but remember that his image was created by a corporate conglomerate to make money. Saint Nicholas, on the other hand, is remembered as one who reflects God’s grace and who better exemplifies the gift of Jesus Christ to this world. Saint Nicholas points us to Jesus, and, we can be sure, he would rather have Jesus remembered than himself. So, as we celebrate Christmas, let’s be sure that we remember it is about grace, God’s grace, and not something we earn or deserve.

Pastor Gary