

“WHAT CHILD IS THIS?”

Introduction

Since Christmas is approaching us, I thought I would talk about – and invite a discussion on – the two main symbols of the Christmas season: Santa Claus and the Christ-Child.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the part of the country where I spent most of my life, each year at Christmas time a large advertisement appeared in the local newspaper, sponsored by a number of the local churches.

It was an advertisement in which two large pictures are placed side by side. One picture is that of Santa Claus in typical pose: red suit and wide black belt fronting a large belly, laughing face, twinkling eyes, full white beard, and white hair curling from underneath his red and white hat.

Then, in a frame right next to him, equal in size, is a typical representation of the adult Jesus: full brown beard, long flowing brown hair, white gown or robe, unlined face, youthful appearance, serious penetrating eyes, right hand forming the sign of peace, and a halo of light surrounding his head.

These two pictures were placed side by side in the advertisement, and above them in large bold letters is the question, “WHOSE BIRTHDAY IS IT, ANYWAY?”, and the additional comment, “We believe the important news at Christmas is not who comes down the chimney, but who came down from heaven.”

When I would see this yearly advertisement I would give what became my traditional Christmas-season groan, and exclaim, though not in quite these words, “Why does the church, or why do at least certain parts of the church, think it has to pit these two main figures of Christmas against each other!”

And, actually, the symbolism in the advertisement isn't right in the first place: It's not the *adult* Jesus who is the center of Christmas celebration; it's the *child* that is at the center – the Child of Christmas, the Christ-child, the Eternal Child, the Babe of Mary. It's the birth-scene, the manger-scene, the crèche that is at the center – not the adult Jesus.

But this aside, why does the church, or why do parts of the church, think it has to pit these two main images of Christmas against each other? Why can't we, as has traditionally been done, simply celebrate and honor both these images of Christmas?

The two main images of Christmas

I think you'll agree that the two main images or symbols of Christmas are the Holy Child, or the Christ-child, and Santa Claus.

Now, the Christ-child is thought of as a religious symbol and Santa Claus as a secular

symbol, but both are at the center of Christmas. And both have to do with the child. And both belong to the heart. And I work with both of them in the same way, for both are symbolic images.

And what they both have to do with, though in somewhat different ways, is the core of the individual, what a person is *at heart*.

The symbol of the Child of Bethlehem

That divine and holy Child there in the manger, surrounded by animals, protected and adored by parents, praised by angels, discovered by shepherds, worshipped by wise men, and threatened by a jealous king; that Divine Child, upon whom the light shines and who is the center of all the attention, represents our own innermost and authentic self, the essential self that we are striving to become. And it represents as well, particularly for parents, the divine birth and potential of the new-born child. That Babe in the Manger, that Child-Ruler, represents the core of ourselves and of every person born into this world.

This, I believe, is what is felt and honored in that divine and miraculous birth at Bethlehem. It's a picture of our own divine birth, and of the birth of our spirit, and of who we are at heart – a picture, an image, of the miraculousness and preciousness of human life. And it's a call to wake up to the miracle of our own life and of all life about us.

Through the course of a year and through the course of a lifetime we grow weary. The world gets worn and shorn of its beauty and value. And so we need to be reminded. Thus, each year at Christmas the Divine Child needs to be born again ... so that we also may be born again ... into the divinity and holiness of our own lives. We need to be recalled to our better selves.

The Holy Child at Christmas is a symbol of our most authentic being and possibility.

Santa Claus as saint

And what about Santa Claus? Who is Santa Claus, symbolically speaking?

Well, Santa Claus is not so much a *direct* symbol of our true self, but Santa, rather, is a symbol of the one who *recognizes* our true self and *honors* it.

And this is what every child acquainted with Santa Claus knows. Every child knows that Santa Claus is the one who knows you and respects you and cares about you and loves you in the deepest way. He knows who you really are; he knows what you really want; he knows what you really need.

Santa Claus doesn't have his own agenda mixed into yours. He doesn't ask you to be anything other than who you are and what you could be. He cares about *you* – he cares

about your truest and deepest and most real self.

Santa Claus is the good father, the good parent. He is so much of what a child would wish a parent to be. And Santa Claus is also what parents would wish themselves to be to their children.

Dr. Duncan Littlefair, who was the minister who brought me into the liberal ministry, is also my mentor for the Christmas season. And he is the one who put me on to the significance of Santa Claus. I heard him speak to this in a sermon in 1976 titled, "Santa Claus As Saint." It was at a time when the Catholic Church was ridding itself of saints, and so Dr. Littlefair thought there might be an opportunity for a new saint. Thus, he nominated Santa Claus as saint. And why? Because, as he said in that sermon:

There Santa is at the North Pole. He's been there all year busy working for you, thinking about you. And how could he find you? In all those houses, how could he find yours? And yet he does.

And how does he know just what you've been hoping for? With all the children in the world, how can he keep track of everything and find just what you are hoping for? And yet he does.

If you never meet another miracle in your life, you've met it there, and you know the world is capable of being miraculous....

What a beautiful figure – that round, jolly, red-faced, white-haired, long-bearded person. What a beautiful, loving, embracing warmth of a figure!

So the Christ-child is a direct symbol of our truest self, and Santa Claus is a symbol of one who recognizes, honors, and encourages that truest self.

Santa Claus for children; the Christ-child for adults

Santa Claus, you see, is particularly for children. Adults love Santa, too, because they remember what he meant to them. But Santa Claus is the one who is most immediately present to children.

In the advertisement I mentioned at the opening of my sermon, one of my thoughts in looking at this advertisement is: which of these figures would appeal most to the heart of a young child? Would it be this serious and youthful portrait of Jesus; or this colorful, jolly figure with the twinkling eyes? There's no question. Of course, it's Santa.

Nor do children relate as readily to the Child in the Manger. That Child in the manger, that holy and divine infant, is primarily a symbol for adults.

This doesn't mean that each can't relate to the other. They do. Children can feel some connection to the Child in the Manger. They see the loving parents Mary and Joseph, and the animals, the shepherds, the wise men, and the glorious star that comes from afar. But Santa at the North Pole is really the one for them!

So, too, adults can relate to Santa Claus – that most generous and jolly of all figures. But it's the Child in the Manger that is most touching. It's the story of that divine birth and that holiest of the holy nights – the night that is most silent, most deep, most precious. O Holy Night!

And so children put on the Christmas pageants primarily for the adults. Yes, they enjoy playing the parts – shepherds with hockey sticks for staffs batting each other about, the glorious angels recently arrived from heaven, the wise ones with their gifts for the infant, and Mary and Joseph, a time to be a pretend parent – the children enjoy, more or less, playing these parts. But it's the adults whose hearts are touched and whose eyes are moistened.

So, too, adults enjoy playing the Santa-scene for children. They enjoy trying to portray that “beautiful, loving, embracing warmth of a figure.” They enjoy stepping into that glorious role of generosity and goodness with a mighty “ho, ho, ho.” But it's the children who are the recipients. And it is they who are excited and moved.

Watch young children as they await the arrival of Santa. Watch as they are about to be taken up into Santa's lap. He's numinous figure for them – both fascinating and a little frightening – a globe of ecstatic energy!

The difficult transition from the literal to the symbolic

And how hard it is, then, for children to find out that Santa Claus is a mythological figure ... that he exists in the heart and the imagination and as a symbol and not an actual person.

Children will fight this knowledge for years. Sometimes they know he's not an actual person many years before they will let themselves consciously know this. Children are afraid they will lose Santa Claus. And what child would want to lose such a figure?

And how hard it is, then, for adults, both younger and older adults, to find out that the Christ-child is also a mythological figure, that he, too, exists in the heart and the imagination and as a symbol, that he is not literal and that these Christmas stories are not factual, historical events.

Many adults will fight this knowledge for years. They know these stories are not historical sometimes many years before they will let themselves consciously know. They are afraid they will lose the Eternal Child, the divine Christ-child. And what adult would want to lose such an image?

Truths of the heart

But, of course, it's not necessary to lose either Santa Claus or the divine Christ-child. Both are spiritual symbols and not historical figures. *The Christ-child has as little to do with the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth as Santa Claus has to do with the*

historical personage of St. Nicholas.

But there are truths other than historical and literal truths: truths of the heart and the mind and the imagination, truths that are so important that we try to make historical, literal, and concrete, forgetting that they are symbols.

And we forget that symbols have to do with the deeper, essential truths of our lives. Symbols pull together and embody the essence of things historical. And they pull together and embody the essence of what we might become and of what we are striving for.

And is not this what Christmas is about: living into and up to these symbols of the human heart?

This is the season of the heart. And this is why it is the season of the Eternal Child and of Santa Claus.

These images revive, revivify, and renew us. They re-acquaint us with our most vital, most tender selves – our sweetest selves:

Santa Claus: that beautiful, loving, embracing warmth of a figure who knows and loves the heart and soul of a child.

And the Babe in the Manger. What child is this? This is the Eternal Child who abides with us, the divine and holy Christ-child within each and all of us. “Haste, haste, to bring him laud.”

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Saturday, December 7, 2012.)