

## Christmas 1 – December 9, 2012 – HRLC

Text – Matthew 12: 18-25

### Bad or Good?

In a recent cartoon, Santa Claus is pictured at his work bench putting a new toy together. From his nearby TV set, he hears a reporter saying, *"We continue our look at the real meaning of Christmas – sales indicators. Consumers have dramatically cut back their borrowing which could slow the economy, but which might be a healthy development after their earlier borrowing which boosted the economy but added to concerns of low savings and over stimulation, but could result in sluggish sales leading into the all-important Christmas sales period."*

Whereupon, Santa looks up and says to himself, *"It used to be a lot easier to know if they've been bad or good."*

How have you been for the past 7 weeks while I have been gone – have you been good or bad? Or maybe I need to ask about a longer period of time, if you weren't here on October 21<sup>st</sup> – have you been good or bad?

Have YOU been bad or good? Do you even KNOW anymore? Do we even know what being bad or being good means anymore? We expect every child climbing into Santa's lap in every store across this land to answer that question. But is it a question ANY of us can answer with any real assurance anymore?

- · Did I spend enough time with my kids, or my spouse this year?
- · Did I really do my best work on the job or at school?
- · Did I donate enough money to my congregation, and to other charities, this year?
- · Did I give wholeheartedly of myself and my time to my community of faith
- · Have I been faithful to my family, my principles, my God throughout this past year?
- · Have I been bad enough to add up to bad in general? Or have I been good enough to add up to good in general?

What does it MEAN to be bad or more importantly – good? Especially at a time when the phrase "You're Bad!" as used by the next generation now means "You're really Good! Awesome!" At Christmas we sing good songs often written by

some who have been bad, and some who have been good during history. King Henry VIII – he of all of the wives and all of the beheadings and imprisonments -- wrote the music to *"Greensleeves"* also known as *"What Child is This?"* Bad or Good?

At Christmas it is easier than perhaps at any other time of year to see what God considers "good." The gift of the Incarnation reveals more powerfully than any other demonstration that God's goodness is defined as being present for all and with all. Our pantheistic God, our God who is far away and up close and personal, defined goodness in terms of being vulnerable and "hands-on," not in terms of being all powerful and "hands-off."

The most jolting, the most unexpected quality of the Christmas story is not that God is powerful enough to alter human history with one act. The real shocker is that God became personally present to all in one singular child – in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we have come to know as The Christ and whom the church has declared to be Son of God.

God fully entered into a particular place and a particular time, with all the limitations and frustrations inherent in that time and clime, in order to put the divine hands-on history. This God incarnate did not even have the good sense to be born into a family of power and prestige, or to have the advantages of wealth and influence. This hands-on, Emmanuel God found the greatest goodness in a humble birth, in being present for the poor and lowly.

In Luke's gospel, "The Magnificat" sings of how one surely beneath God's attention – a poor peasant girl – became the one chosen and uplifted as a central actor in the incarnation drama. In Matthew's gospel, however, with its distinctly male perspective, the hands-on quality of the Incarnation is at first perceived as something truly bad.

Joseph is confronted with the unexpected pregnancy of Mary, his betrothed. This is about as bad as it gets in the first century. Since Joseph knew the child was not his, he prepared to nullify their betrothal agreement. Even though he chose not to publicly vilify Mary, preferring a "quiet" private ceremony, in a small village their story would obviously be the talk of the town.

Mary's pregnancy could not be hidden. The child's birth would be conclusive evidence of her apparent immorality and betrayal. Although Joseph intended that she escape the legally sanctioned

death by stoning, Mary was about to become permanently scarred by scandal. Joseph himself faced humiliation and a loss of face within the community for allowing himself to be so badly fooled by a young, insignificant woman/child.

This is good? But this hands-on God wasn't finished messing about in this couple's lives. Through the appearance of an angelic messenger God got hands-on with Joseph, and let him in on the divine hands-on plan for history and his important role in that plan. It is through the actions of Joseph, through the obedience of a faithful man who believed he had been terribly wronged, that everything will turn out all right.

And this brings us to the essence of a goodness that is hands-on. Hands-on goodness means "I Beg to Differ."

Samuel Rayan, writing in *Gifts of Many Cultures*, says of candles that they are "a protest at midnight. Lighting a candle is a nonconformist gesture. It says to the darkness, 'I beg to differ.'"

Joseph begged to differ. To a culture that said "put her away," Joseph said, "I beg to differ." To a world that said God is all powerful and far away and abstract and aloof, God said, "I beg to differ."

To be good means to beg to differ, and to pass on that difference.

Former Atlanta mayor and UN ambassador Andrew Young tells about the time that his daughter announced that she had decided she was going to Uganda to work with Habitat for Humanity. Young said it put him in a real bind. After all, he's a Christian and he had raised her to be a Christian. He supported Habitat for Humanity. But he was also the Ambassador to the United Nations. He knew about Uganda. He knew the danger, the conflicting forces, the risk she was taking.

Young says he tried to talk her out of it, but there was no changing her mind. This was God's calling for her life. He describes the January morning when he stood at the Atlanta airport, with tears streaming down his cheeks and watched her plane lift off the ground. He said that in that moment realized, ***'I always wanted her to be a respectable Christian – not a real one!'***

Which will it be this morning? Which do you decide to be:

- A good Christian or a bad One?
- A Christian that begs to differ?
- Or a Christian that strive to comply?

- A Christian that passes on God's hands-on touch?
- Or a Christian that keeps one's hands in one's pockets?

When we don't beg to differ, when we don't act in a "hands-on" manner there is always trouble. The world, our lives, our families, our souls, cannot run on autopilot. When we leave portions of our lives on cruise control something always get out of control.

It was 22 December, and the mother of several children suddenly realized that she hadn't sent out any Christmas cards. In dismay, she sent her 10-year-old son to the drugstore for a box of Christmas cards. *"Hurry,"* she said. *"I'll barely have time to get these in the mailbox before the day's final pickup."* The boy ran all the way to the store and soon returned with a box of 25 cards, all alike. Quickly, without even looking at them, she signed them, addressed and stamped the envelopes, handed them to her boy who promptly deposited them in the corner of the mailbox. Later, the mother noticed that there was one card left in the box. She picked it up and looked at the verse. It read: ***"This little card is just to say, a gift you'll love is on the way."***

We get caught. We always get caught.

Forget Santa Claus is coming to town. God came to town, a town called Bethlehem, and God comes down to every town.

You better watch out. You better not pout. You better not cry. I'm telling you why – Jesus Christ is coming to town.

He's making a list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who is naughty and nice. He knows when you've been sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good. So Be Good for Goodness sake.

Beg to differ. And pass on that difference, that loving touch, to others, throughout these days of this Christmas Season, these days leading up to the birth of the child.

Beg to differ. And pass on that difference, that loving touch, to others. Amen.