

## “Being Santa”

Christmas Eve, 10:00 pm worship

December 24, 2018

*by Bill Chadwick*

Near the end of the staff meeting my new boss turned to me and asked, “Will you play Santa for the employee Christmas party?”

Santa? The old, chubby guy? This wasn’t a request that made one feel like a jolly elf.

I was dumbfounded. For the first forty years of my life, I had been so slender that one of my “friends” described me as “prisoner-of-war scrawny.” My supercharged metabolism roared like a Hong Kong hula hoop factory in 1958. While training for a marathon in my early 30s it was all I could do to keep 132 pounds on my six-foot frame. However, past forty that metabolism had slowed to a crawl, maybe a limp. Thus, having just turned fifty I had indeed begun to experience “middle” age.

Still . . . Santa Claus?!

I was the new chaplain at a care center. Care centers don’t employ a lot of men. It was evidently my turn to play Santa. Besides the whole girth issue, I wasn’t a big fan of Santa Claus in general. Certainly I was at one time in my life, but now, as an adult—and particularly as a pastor—the whole idea of Santa made me uncomfortable. “Making a list, checking it twice,” rewarding kids for

being good, was blatantly antithetical to the Christian concept of grace, God's love for us *regardless* of our behavior. In addition, Santa seemed to me the very embodiment of the intense, crass commercialization of Christmas.

A pastor playing Santa Claus . . . sigh.

But as the new guy, I was reluctant to refuse my boss's request. I forced a cheery smile and said I would do my best. The party was two weeks away and there would be dozens of little kids there, children of the staff.

Thus, a few days before Christmas, I found myself donning the costume—a rich red velvet suit, luxurious hair and beard, big black boots. And pillow. At least they felt I needed that.

I clomped into the party room, crowded with employees and their kids. My jolly “Ho! Ho! Ho!” was met with squeals of delight—not only from the children, but from the grown-ups as well. “Santa! Hi, Santa Claus!” Kids ran up and enveloped me in a giant group hug, their faces bright with excitement. They clung to my legs, stroked the velvet suit, and gently touched my splendid beard. After I was able to break free, I handed out candy canes and received more grateful hugs and high fives.

The kids were having *so* much fun that the Scrooge inside the Santa suit couldn't help himself. He was enjoying this gig. I made sure I interacted with each of the children—and each of the adults—at the party.

Then I figured that as long as I was all dressed up and sweating like a tuxedoed groom at an outdoor August wedding—this suit was truly made for the

North Pole—I might as well spread some cheer among the residents as well. I wasn't sure what sort of reception to expect.

I walked next door to our short-term care unit and into the dining room. Two patients were seated at the round table nearest the door, a woman of about eighty, opposite her a man of the same vintage. They were eating without conversing; it was obvious they didn't know each other.

I strode over to the woman with a jolly “Merry Christmas!” and a “Ho! Ho! Ho!” Placing my white-gloved hand on her shoulder, I peered over the round spectacles perched on my nose and heartily inquired, “Have you been a good little girl this year?”

An impish grin crossed her face. Emphatically she shook her head. “No, I certainly have not!”

The man opposite was watching the two of us; at her remark, his eyebrows shot skyward. He made a beckoning gesture with his hand.

“Then send her over to my house!” he exclaimed.

My round little belly truly shook like a bowl full of jelly as I laughed and laughed, choosing not to reveal that underneath this fake beard and red suit and racy-sounding questions was the *chaplain*.

Next, I visited patients in their rooms. Most were folks newly released from the hospital, recovering from hip and knee surgeries, plus a couple “MVAs”—motor vehicle accident victims. And a few folks with terminal cancer. All the patients had been through major transitions lately, and were now facing the prospect of being away from home and family at Christmastime.

Picture it: A light, unexpected knock, and into their rooms stepped... Santa Claus. The response was universal: dropped jaws, sharp intakes of breath, eyes wide with delight. “Santa!” they exclaimed, reaching out to shake my hand, give a hug, stroke my beard. “Merry Christmas to *you*,” they said. “Thanks *so much* for stopping by!”

Of course, unlike the children, these folks didn’t “believe” in Santa Claus. Yet they obviously felt more kindly toward him than I had. For them, Santa represented hope, love, childlike trust, and wonderful memories. They were enchanted by a personal visit.

By this time, my frosty attitude had completely melted away in the warmth of their reactions. I felt so genuinely honored to play this revered figure, and soon I felt a profound sense of my own unworthiness to do so. Santa on a TV screen, telling kids they should ask for some plastic junk; or, for the adult consumers, equating love with buying pricey diamonds for your wife; was one thing. But *being* Santa—knowing I was just a cranky, sweaty guy inside this velvet suit, a suit that was not just something for me to complain about having to put on, but a powerful symbol of magic and mystery and the spirit of giving—that was something else.

Christmas is the celebration of love in the flesh, I thought. Perhaps we should take it wherever we can find it.

And *be* it, wherever and however we can.