

According to Mark . . . December 2018

As you are reading this, my wife Kate and I are on a plane coming back from our annual tropical holiday, this time in Barbados. And, as we're walking down the jetway and welcomed home, it made me ponder who we anticipate arriving during this Advent season. And since I'm wearing sunglasses as I disembark my flying metal tube to Boston, let's disguise these folks a little bit similarly. So whom do we anticipate? And what should they bring to us and our hearts? I know I sometimes get confused between these two folks:



Ask anyone, and it's amazing to me how well we know the person in the first picture. Red hat, white beard. All full of ho-ho-ho and hearty joy-giving belly laughs with presents for good girls and boys.

Ask anyone, and it's amazing to me that if this picture were not in the church newsletter that we would even venture a clue as to the identity of the person in the second picture. Looks a little bit like a young Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, for those of you wondering) to me wearing some pretty nifty shades. But then again, this is a church newsletter. So what if I told you this was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who shared his sufferings with sinners and outcasts? Again, if this weren't a church newsletter, I'd challenge anyone to choose to welcome the person in picture #2 into their homes and hearts compared to the Jolly Old Elf in photo #1.

And therein lies our challenge. We go through this each and every year. We promise to be better friends, neighbors, Christians, to help others like we'd like to be helped. And yet we engage in ever more appalling displays of tribal preferences and opinions that keep us away from the very folks that we pledge to assist. Mostly because we have ever more custom news sources that we listen to, ever more confined circles of friends in Facebook and Twitter where if you're not followed or liked, you're just not in the club. It pays to be popular these days, and we gauge ourselves in the numbers of "likes" we have.

But the person in photo #2 came into the world to show us how we might live differently. How we might turn around our popular selves into persons who care for the UN-popular. How we can be more alive by looking in the unlikely places for specialness, peace, love, mercy, compassion, and ultimately, God. We remind ourselves that Jesus comes to us born to a teenage, unwed mother giving birth in a shed

because even in her pregnant condition she was turned away. Mary was judged an outcast before anyone heard her story or cared to; and yet, she is the bearer of God, of Good News, of forgiveness for all even though none was offered to her. Jesus, the person in photo #2, doesn't need shades as the light of the world to look, and be, cool. And yet we still gravitate toward photo #1 without all the uncomfortable feelings that the other person brings to our hearts, minds, souls, and Spirits.

The difference between the two is this: Santa brings happiness that we are special, worthy of getting stuff our hearts desire without anything needed in return. Just put it on the list and it appears in our house, or on our wrist or fingers or earlobes or feet. Santa gives what's wanted at this moment of Christmas, all the time.

Jesus brings joy, which is not a feeling of being given to, but a feeling that emanates from giving to others. Jesus asks for our hearts to be outward-focused away from our selfish needs and for us to enter into lives of those around us, and then meet THEIR needs, but not necessarily in a way that we would proscribe. Mercy and compassion require us to listen, not project. To serve, not be served. To give what's in the heart, not necessarily what's on the list. Jesus gives what's needed for life's sustaining relationships with each other and God, not what's needed for the moment, all the time.

I hope our confusion lessens as we continue down our Advent road. Come and pick a tag out of the Mason Jar this season. Read or request an Advent devotional and let its lessons wash over us. But most of all, follow the one who illuminates desires of the soul, not wants of the moment. I promise the journey is worth it.

Blessings for Christmas,

Pastor Mark