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WHOSE BIRTHDAY IS IT ANYWAY?

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~ Scripture: Romans 12:1-2 ~

INTRODUCTION

My sermon this morning is to help prepare us for the Holiday season. For many this will be:

A) A HARD TIME (i.e.: dreaded)

- It will underscore the harshness of life; perhaps be a reminder of better times.
- Families will get together, but old jealousies, animosities, unresolved conflicts will flare. . .and they'll end up in a squabble.
- Some families which are so broken will stay apart, and the isolation & separation will hurt even more.
- For those who have experienced loss, the joy of the rest of the world will be like vinegar in the wound.

B) A BUSY TIME (i.e.: “a times between times”)

- Scheduling is often different during December.

C) A FUN TIME (e.g.: with lots of parties, gifts & cards, and family gatherings)

The Scripture I have chosen to guide us this morning is **Romans 12:1-2 [NIV]** —

“¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve that God’s will is good, pleasing and perfect.”

Now that **1st verse** always puzzles us. Sounds barbaric, savage and brutal, doesn’t it? I think **THE MESSAGE** (a contemporary paraphrase of the New Testament) captures the essence of it:

“Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.”

When you offer your bodies (lives) to God in this way, you are truly worshipping Him.

The **2nd verse** warns us to refuse to fashion ourselves after the world and its ways. It’s saying:

- Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.
- Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world.
- Don’t live any longer the way this world lives.
- Don’t become so well-adjusted to the surrounding culture that you fit into it without even thinking. It’s not that good a fit. It’s like an article of clothing that’s not “me”.

But you & I know the world has the power to form and shape us. It has a strong influence on our mind, our emotions, our attitudes. And this influence ultimately shows up in our conduct.

How do we counter this? How do we live as God wants us to live in the world around us? The one-word answer is: DIFFERENT. Where the *ways of the world* contradict the *ways of God*, the choice should be obvious. But it's a difficult choice. You've got to have a mind to make that choice—a mind that only God can put in you—to resist the world's constant pressure to squeeze you into its mold.

Now the “mind” is the acting, ruling part of us—it hosts our attitudes, our point of view, our values, standards and ideals. And that's where God starts His transforming work—by renewing our mind. . . by changing our way of thinking. . . by making different our whole approach to life.

When we make the choice to live as God's people. . . to follow His ways, His will—we will find that His plan is (according to v. 2):

- GOOD -- it lines up with God's nature (i.e.: He is good); it is also good for us;
- PLEASING -- it is the only way to gain His favor. . . to please Him;
- PERFECT -- it is complete in itself (i.e.: nothing can be added).

APPLICATION

Let's apply this Scripture to our celebrations—especially CHRISTMAS & the whole Holiday season.

I wonder if there are some ways we can make our festivity less stressful, less commercial, less wasteful and expensive, less conforming to this world's pattern. . . and more personal, more joyful, more focused on the One whose birthday it is anyway?

The way we allow ourselves to be caught up in our culture's “annual Xmas shopping spree”—by the way, Americans will spend \$20⁺ billion this year—it almost looks more like we are celebrating our birthday than His birthday.

So let's look at a couple ways we can transform our celebration of Christmas this season—and make some changes as the Holy Spirit guides. I have TWO S's for you to remember:

~ **SIMPLIFY** and **SHARE** ~

I. SIMPLIFY YOUR CELEBRATION

Make it as simple and meaningful as possible:

- Maybe it's spending more time with family. . . doing something for people less fortunate.
- Maybe it's buying fewer gifts. . . doing less than you usually try to do (e.g.: entertaining, decorating). . . going to fewer events.

How can we simplify? By concentrating on ONE THING:

- A) FOR FAMILY: **One** experience (look for that one special moment). With respect to gifts, I like what one family in our church does: They get three gifts for each child. “*Jesus got three gifts, each of you will get three gifts.*”
- B) FOR HUSBANDS: **One** gift that is important to your wife. [I don't know about you,

but I want someone to give me a present that lets me know they know who I am, what I like, what's important to me.] So, talk to her now so you know what gift is the most important for her to receive. Then get it before it's too late (Xmas Eve is too late)! ☺

- C) FOR WOMEN: **One** new thing to try from the glitzy magazines (e.g.: a recipe, a Decoration, etc.). Just a word of advice (from MARCIE): Don't buy a bunch of those glitzy magazines to begin with. They "set the bar" too high.

Might I suggest that one of the best ways you could avoid the commercialism of Christmas is to take advantage of our GIFTS UNTO OTHERS program. . .in addition to ANGEL TREE and OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD.

II. SHARE THE GOOD NEWS

The best thing we could do is share HIM (Jesus) with someone who doesn't know Him.

After all, He's the gift that keeps on giving—all through the year, for a lifetime.

What He came to do on the Cross and in our lives is what Christmas is all about anyway.

➤ *"He came to take away the sin of the world"* (John the Baptist in John 1:29)

➤ *"He came into the world to save sinners"* (Paul in I Timothy 1:15)

The Son of God became the Son of Man that the sons of men might become the sons of God.

What better gift could you share with a hurting world?!

The Missions & Evangelism Cell has created a little tool to help you do just that—SHARE THE GOOD NEWS—not only during this season, but anytime. When you came into the sanctuary this morning, you were handed a copy of this little booklet. It so happens that its author is a member of our congregation—MARK SUTTER, whom I'm going to ask to join me here for a couple minutes.

~ INTERVIEW WITH MARK SUTTER ~

I want you to hang on to this booklet, because it will be the centerpiece of a series of sermons and workshops this coming spring. But let me whet your appetite a little.

Did you know there are many levels of sharing the Good News? You ask: "Pastor, isn't inviting someone to the Christmas Eve services this year 'sharing the Good News'?" It certainly is! And hopefully, many seeds will be sown in the lives of those who come to our three services. There are some here this morning that first came in contact with us at a Christmas Eve service (e.g.: Mark & Claudia Aills). But it isn't getting people into church that matters so much as inviting them into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ!

A) It begins with friendship. It's a good thing for us to befriend non-believers as well as believers. Jesus was known for spending time with "tax collectors and other sinners". Often non-believers' view of Christianity is tainted by the media or a bad experience. They need to see our faith as more than a set of do's and don't's; they need to see a life that is lived differently. So, **FAITH-SHARING CONCEPT #1: Common Courtesies [p. 3].**

B) Not everyone is ready to receive the life-transforming Gospel message. The role of the Holy Spirit in all this is to prepare people's hearts to hear and to receive. As He is working, we can do our part in increasing someone's comfort level AND pique their curiosity by little references to our faith in the course of a conversation. This is **FAITH-SHARING CONCEPT #2: Faith Flags [p. 5].** Some great examples follow.

C) Faith flags open the door to share your faith with someone. The time may come when that person says in one way or the other, “I want to know more.” That leads to **FAITH-SHARING CONCEPT #3: Faith Short-Stories [p. 6]**. These are brief descriptions of how you handled a crisis, or how God answered a prayer, or a response to something someone says.

D) Every one of us needs to be ready for what comes next: to give our testimony. Refer to **FAITH-SHARING CONCEPT #4: Sharing Your Testimony [p. 8]**. Peter urged us to “*always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. . .Do this with gentleness and respect*” (I Peter 3:15). A personal testimony need not be more than a couple minutes—and include your life before you were a Christian, how you became a Christian, and what your life has been like since. Everybody here ought to sit down and write one out!

E) Finally, a full-blown sharing of how someone may come to know Jesus personally. This is a sharing of the details of the Gospel, which they need to know if they are to come to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life. **FAITH-SHARING CONCEPT #5: Presenting the Gospel [p. 11]**. What better way to celebrate His birthday than to give Him the gift of a brand new sheep in His fold! It might not happen on or by December 25th, but it can begin this season.

CONCLUSION

So, whose birthday is it anyway? Is it ours. . .or His?

How does your way of celebrating these holidays answer that question?

- Do you need to SIMPLIFY?
- Is God calling you to SHARE (not just material things, but the deeper things of faith)?

At this time of year, when people feel the emptiest. . .when they are hopeless and frantic, worried and distressed, you & I have the opportunity to share (on some level) the CHRIST of Christmas.

Will you do it?