

Neighbourhood Re-Santa-fication

By Preston Pouteaux

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Gift-giving has always been a big part of Christmas. Yet in our age of consumerism more and more people are foregoing gift-giving, or at least limiting their purchases, and it's easy to see why. Busy malls, credit-card debt, gift-cards, and piles of 'stuff' seem to overshadow the true heart of the Christmas story. It's a growing trend in many families to dial back on the shopping and save money for other activities. Santa, it seems, has lost some of his jingle.

Here's something that might be surprising: Christmas is still very much about gifts. It's about taking what we have, and sharing it with others. It's about realizing the gifts we've been given and creating a culture of generosity in our lives, work places, and neighbourhoods. It's about gratitude and love. At the heart of the Christmas story, under the star of Bethlehem and down in the manger-scene we find that in this birthday story God has become the Gift-Giver. From every angle, Christmas is truly about giving, but not necessarily about 'stuff.'

The roots of Christmas gift-giving go way back. Before Santa rode onto the scene with his belly like a bowl full of jelly, it was Saint Nicholas who set the stage for seventeen hundred years of Christmas gift-giving. Nicholas was the bishop of Myra, a coastal region of modern-day Turkey along the Mediterranean Sea. His family were among some of the first Christians and were so deeply touched by the story of Jesus that they passionately found creative ways of living out their faith. Nicholas, as a young man, visited the place where Jesus was born and the story of Christ's gift of love to the world shaped his own life. On one occasion, Nicholas wanted to help a poor family and snuck some money into their home. His secret act of kindness came to light and his story became an inspiration. Yet Nicholas was not entirely the gentleman we might think. He is known for having gotten into at least one fist-fight and when scientists examined his bones recently they discovered that this five-foot tall scrappy bishop had a broken nose. For all his rough edges, it was his faith, generosity to local families, and his care for sailors that would eventually make him into a legendary figure.

It is amazing to consider that the simple kindness and generosity of a feisty Greek sailor could have such an impact on how we celebrate Christmas today. Throughout the world people celebrate the birth of Jesus by emulating the actions of this kind hearted person. Whether motivated by the same faith as Saint Nicholas or not, the spirit of gift-giving is universal.

What would happen if our neighbourhoods became places where kindness and generosity became the order of the day? Imagine if the streets where we live became the kind of places where we gave and received gifts of encouragement, friendship, help, and hospitality? In the spirit of Saint Nicholas, what would the "Re-Santa-fication" of our neighbourhoods look like? We, like Nicholas, may be rough around the edges, but a posture of generosity may profoundly shape the way we see our streets this year. A renewed culture of charity between neighbours would be one of the most profound gifts we could ever give to our city.

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