

“Images of God: Santa Claus?”

January 30, 2011

Genesis 12:1-4

The following text is a description of the initial call that Abraham received to follow God. The call, although brief, comes with the promise that not only will God bless Abram, but that God will remake Abram to bless others. The image of God offered through this text is not only a God that blesses but that through this blessing, God changes us in our relationships with others.

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”

In one of his books, theologian Miroslav Volf, tells the story of how one year, about a week or so before Christmas, he was walking with his two young children. When he and his two sons turned a corner, there standing before them in a red suit, black boots, and white beard was a tall and imposing Santa Claus. His youngest son who was around two at the time, knew about Santa but had never seen the real thing. He reacted by hiding behind his father in order to keep his distance from this peculiar looking stranger. No sooner did this happen when Volf’s older son said to his younger brother, ‘No Aaron, no, don’t be afraid, this is Santa Claus, he will give us something!’ And sure enough, just for being there, Santa gave the two young boys some candy.

Reflecting on this, Volf writes the following, he says, “this is what Santa does. Santa gives, even if parents warn their children that Santa only gives to good girls and boys, Santa still gives. And after giving these gifts, Santa makes no demands. With a big bag of presents, Santa can seem to come out of nowhere, and after granting everyone their wishes, he disappears again.”

When it comes to images of God, I think many of us want to believe in a Santa Claus god. The kind of god who will give us whatever we want and then disappear until we want something else. I mean face it, isn’t that the ideal relationship that a lot of people have in mind these days? That they will meet someone, or find something that will give them everything they want...like a genie in a bottle...or a leprechaun...or their own personal Santa Claus?

Some scholars of popular religion have described Santa as “a god of consumerist materialism whose sole purpose is to give.” And indeed, many people think of God in this way, as a Santa Claus that has taken on

divine proportions. Believing in this kind of god is an impediment to genuine faith. There are those who refuse to believe in God because the God they reject is in their mind, a Santa Claus God. They believe that God is supposed to be like Santa Claus, and give them whatever they desire or want. But when God doesn't come through or has not come through in their lives, when they don't get what they want, they refuse to believe in God. They believe that somehow God has rejected them. I have certainly met my fair share of people who have found their faith challenged and turned their back on God because they felt slighted in life. Ones who have believed that they have been handed a raw deal because they didn't receive the things they felt entitled to. And you know, a lot of this comes from this false image we carry in us that God is supposed to be like Santa Claus. We make our list in life and expect God to deliver the goods.

It seems easier for us to name the places where we've been slighted than to identify the goodness we have received in life. Author Joe Myers argues that we are better prepared to understand the omnipresence of evil in the world than we are the omnipresence of God and good. Think about that, people are more willing to believe in the existence of evil, rather than the ever present power of God and good. But this is what can happen, when we live our lives feeling as if God has rejected us because God didn't give us everything we wanted in life. We say that God is infinitely rich, always giving, generous –or at least, that's what we believe any a god worthy of divinity ought to be. God gives without condition and without demands. As the earth moves and the seasons change, so God gives – solves our problems, fulfills our desires, and is there to make us feel good. A Santa Claus God is the source of all and everything that is to come our way and demands nothing of us.

Yes, it's true that God most certainly gives generously out of his abundant love for us. But is it true that God demands nothing? If this were so, then why would Jesus have urged his disciples to behave and act differently than what they had been accustomed to? Would Jesus have given new commandments? If this were the case than why would God had said to Abram in our reading this morning, "I will bless you, in order that you can bless others?"

It's really no different than the way a lot of people view their status of citizenship and the role of Government. It's easy to see the government as being some external organization or body that is there to provide for us and fail to see that as citizens of a democracy we are the basis of our government and have a role to play as a part of our civic duty. We receive security and services while we pay taxes and give our time to the greater good. This only works when we see ourselves as a part of the bigger picture and a larger relationship.

You see, when we worship a Santa Claus God: We can believe that God is infinitely generous and the source of all good, but forget that in some sense we were created by God to be in some sense like God. Now

we are not like God in God's divinity, but like God "in true righteousness and holiness" as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians. Or as our reading from Genesis puts it this morning, we are to be like God in blessing. God says I will bless you that you might live to bless others. In other words, to live well as a human being is to live in sync with who God is and how God acts.

As Abram embarks on this relationship with God, he is beginning just that. Even as an adult, he is beginning his walk with God. Abraham is discovering how God acts, seeking to live in sync with God. This is what happens in our baptism, it is the beginning of this life of blessing...a life of faith. To receive the baptism of Christ is to begin to sync our lives with the presence of the Holy Spirit that we might grow in our ability to be a blessing unto others. We don't just receive our baptism like a present under the tree. It is instead an acknowledgment that we are beginning a life long journey in which God expects that through this relationship, not only will we receive blessing in our lives, but that we will come to bless others as we acknowledge this power and presence that is beyond us as individuals.

So what does this look like, a life that goes beyond making God into Santa Claus? How do we bless others? One author I encountered has a tradition of blessing that he brings to every meal that he eats out at a restaurant. He times his grace to the moment when the server brings the food, and draws them into the blessing. "Is there anything I can pray for you? Is there a special blessing you need?" He says he tries to bless someone at every meal. When I read that I said "Wow, that's pretty bold!" But for this man it's a spiritual practice and he's not looking to offend anyone, not expecting anything in return, he's just seeking to include others in a wider circle of love and care.

You see the blessing isn't all about "me." It's about the transforming love of God. It is Christ's presence that gives the shape of holiness to our lives and others, that's the real blessing. That's why we need Christ, we need this mediator, otherwise it does become all about me and what I need to do for me. Instead, Jesus is the source and shape of that love for me and for others. The love found in Christ transforms my life and others. When you leave this place, you bring the blessing of Christ, not yourself, into the world. You are release the energies of the risen Christ into the world. One might say you are to develop a "Blessing Complex."

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who I've referred to previously in this series of reflections popularized the term "complex," and taught us that "complexes" are not subject to reason. You have heard of the "inferiority complex?" This is someone who looks at life and other people through inferiority glasses. You can sing the praises of someone so loud it is deafening, and still the person with an "inferiority complex" will feel inferior. One slight or one misconstrued statement and someone with an inferiority complex can think the whole world is against them. And you've likely heard of the "superiority complex?" This is someone who looks at life through the spectacles of superiority. That somehow they ARE God's gift. Well God wanted Abram to

have a “blessing complex.” We cannot help but look at life and each other through the spectacles of “blessing:” we think everyone we meet, and everywhere we go, needs a blessing. We are bearers of God’s gift and can’t be reasoned out of it. Even if we are in the wealthiest home, or the wealthiest nation in the world, we have this irrational belief that even the wealthiest person in the world needs a blessing.

And what is the blessing that they need? They need the blessing of Christ . . . the presence and power of Christ in their lives. If we have a “blessing complex,” we bring the blessing that is Christ into the world every day of our lives to every person in our lives.

What can you do to bring that blessing to others? What actions can you take?

Learning our love languages and the languages of others help us to become a blessing. Dr. Gary Chapman notes that when others are unable to communicate in their love language, they will find their life in a spiritual crisis. Helping others to move beyond that period of crisis can truly be a blessing.

You can bless someone with as little as a glance or a smile or a phone call.

You bless people by how you see and hear and treat them. And this means you don’t curse them! This might sound silly, but something I find curious about this text from Genesis is how God says “I will curse those you curse you” but does not tell us that we should curse others. And that’s because God seeks to free us from this behaviour, in order that we might seek to bless. “Leave the cursing to me,” says God, “you focus on blessing.” Instead of grumbling and cursing the ways you have been slighted and those you feel have done you wrong. You can take a “blessing break:” stop and start thanking God for all your blessings; for the person who delivers your mail; for your computer and its not having crashed this week; for your pets; for your spouse; your children.

You don’t need to be holy to bless others. But in that blessing you will discover holiness. When you extend a Christ blessing to others, you are affirming Christ’s presence and power that is omnipresent in the world. You are affirming the goodness that is all around us.

You see, if God were a Santa Claus God, God would simply give so we could have and enjoy things; but instead of being self-absorbed receivers, the true God gives so we can become joyful givers.

Each of us has been blessed to bless.