

THE DUH AND THE DO'H OF CHRISTMAS

Philippians 2:1-8

Matthew 7:12

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,
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There are two problems that may get in the way of our enjoying a perfect Christmas. First: there's the problem of its obviousness. The Nativity story is so familiar that it's nearly impossible for us to experience it as something new, as though hearing it for the first time, and so be amazed by the wonder and glory of it. And the second problem is this: the meaning of Christmas may get lost amid the many distractions and the sheer busy-ness of the season. So, in addition to the problem of the obviousness of Christmas, there's also this matter of human forgetfulness of its first and true meaning.

Two ways of stating these problems are with the American slang words "duh" and "d'oh." "Duh" has been around for awhile, but was popularized by the 1995 film *Clueless*. It means, loosely: "what you've just said to me is so obvious that you didn't need to have said it." It lets the other person know that you're already aware of whatever he/she has just said. "D'oh" was introduced by the cartoon character Homer Simpson. It means, loosely: "I can't believe I forgot that, and now I feel dumb or exasperated about forgetting." "D'oh" is the verbal equivalent of wincing; in fact, when Homer says "d'oh" it's often along with a wince and a slap on the head. So, if you were to say to me, "Rick, Christmas is right around the corner," I might say, "duh," like, tell me something I don't already know; or, if I'd actually forgotten about Christmas, I might say, "d'oh," I'd better get to work on that.

There is both a "duh" and a "d'oh" about Christmas.

The Nativity? Duh. Everything about this story we know already. We know the characters. We know the plot. We know how it turns out. We even know the lines. It's all so obvious. Whatever else a Church School Nativity Pageant is, one thing it surely is *not* is innovative theater.

I think that's why we like to hear about Christmas pageants where something goes wrong. There's a story about a church where the part of the innkeeper was assigned to a fourth grader who was by nature of boy of irrepressible friendliness and good cheer. Every time they practiced his part he felt so bad turning Mary and Joseph away that he nearly cried. On the day of the performance, Mary and Joseph walked across the stage to the door of the inn and knocked. The innkeeper opened the door. There was actually a catch in his voice as he told them: "No room." But then, perhaps moved by the sanctuary being filled with people, he called to Mary and Joseph as they turned to walk away: "Oh, come in, anyway, and have a drink." The congregation was charmed, no doubt, but the innkeeper probably had a good talking-to when he got home.

The story of Jesus' birth is so familiar that it's difficult, if not impossible, for grown-ups to know the joy and wonder of it all, or to experience it as something astonishingly new and exciting. The holiday season, so called, may even become more burden than blessing. Peter

Gomes, Dean of the Chapel at Harvard, observes that by time we get to this Sunday each year, the Third Sunday of Advent, even the most faithful and devout soul may begin to have Christmas feelings, not “of comfort and joy, but of a dutiful sense that it must be done in order to be done with.”

What’s needed is a recovery of that childlike sense of innocence and openness we all had once, but lost along the way. The Bible states it sublimely in the Book of Philippians, chapter two. God is too big for human understanding. The finite mind cannot grasp the Infinite. So God took-on human form, being born in the likeness of a baby.

Lauren Winner writes:

Here is the thing about God. He is so big and so perfect that we can’t really understand Him. We can’t possess Him, or apprehend Him. . . But He so wants to be in relationship with us that He makes himself small, smaller than He really is, smaller and more humble than his infinite, perfect self, so that we might be able to get to Him, a little bit.

Here is the truth transmitted by the beauty of Christmas. But we know all this. You knew this stuff before you came this morning. In Jesus Christ God took-on human form. Duh. What else is new?

But if we can get beyond the “duh” of Christmas, then everything changes. Then it’s like “d’oh” . . . of course, how could I ever have forgotten that! If God loves me this much, with a love so great that it broke the barriers of time and space, the barriers of flesh and spirit, the barriers human and divine, why, then, how ought we to love one another! Perhaps the most important verse concerning the truth of Christmas isn’t found in the traditional Christmas story, but in Matthew 7:12, where it is written that Jesus said: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

If you’re anything at all like me, you find yourself, many times everyday, regretting failures to honor this simplest but most profound of all teachings. “D’oh” . . . I might have been kinder to that person. “D’oh” . . . I should have apologized “D’oh” . . . I could have been more patient.” “D’oh” . . . why didn’t I think twice before twice saying what I did? “D’oh” . . . I could have been more positive and encouraging. It’s not that we don’t know these things. It’s that we know them in theory, but forget or neglect them in practice. Always, it seems, we’re wincing as it occurs to us that once again we’ve forgotten how Christ wants us to be. What might it take for us to treat others as we would want others to treat us?

Friday night I went to the Met to see “The Magic Flute.” Because “The Magic Flute” is fanciful, with dragons and birds, monsters and flying spirits of the air, it’s an opera parents sometimes bring children to see. But it’s still an ordeal for a child, I would think. Anyway, there was a family sitting close-by, and the children were kind of squirmy. It was fine with me. At intermission, though, the man next to me growled: “Those blankety-blank kids. What are their blankety-blank parents thinking?” I just shrugged. I don’t know. I didn’t want to get into it with

him. But then he stopped himself. You could almost see his mind working, as though to say, “D’oh.” “Ah, I shouldn’t be like this at Christmas,” he said. And I thought: if by that you mean there’s this December window-in-time when you ought to be nice, but you can still be grouchy and unpleasant the rest of the year, then I think you miss the point. But if by that you mean Christmas transmits some sublime eternal truths about the character of God, and teaches, as well, how our character ought to be transformed permanently by the self-expending love of God in Jesus Christ, then, “Amen, brother.” Amen and amen.