

## Seeking and Finding God Through The Eyes of Santa

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Some of you may not know that I have been engaged for 25 years in what I believe to be is a ministry that involves my serving as Santa for a variety of organizations as they have holiday gatherings. This ministry began for me some 25 years ago in Birmingham where I was a member of the Birmingham Exchange Club, a civic/service organization that sponsors an annual holiday party for children with special needs. These children often times had severe physical, mental or emotional challenges that precluded their visiting with Santa at the local mall or the other usual public places. Our Exchange Club sponsored the "Santa Sunshine Special" for several hundred children each year where they could visit with Santa, have their picture taken and receive a gift bag that contained lots of wonderful items-toys, books, games, and a sweet treat or two. There was entertainment of all kinds including puppets, choirs, face painting, lots of beautifully decorated Christmas trees and other holiday decorations. The photo of each child with Santa was magically developed and placed in a photo button while the child was visiting with the jolly old guy.

I alternated serving as Santa with a very good friend, Wayne Dutt, a CPA who loved children as I do. Imagine, a CPA and a Banker/Lawyer wearing a furry red suit and hat, long white beard and the hottest, most uncomfortable white wig you can imagine! I have to tell you-it is all worth it to see the sparkle and wonderment in the eyes of a child who faces challenges each day that we cannot imagine warms you to the core of your being. Their thrill at being able to visit with Santa and have a few private moments to spend with this very special character was evidenced by their repeated exclamations of "I love you Santa", "I am so glad I finally got to visit with you", or their questions regarding the North Pole and Rudolph and did I really fly through the sky in a sleigh being pulled by reindeer were all expressions of their wonder and excitement.

Children are wonderful and precious gifts-I believe they are truly a manifestation of God's love for us and for the world -a young child's anticipation of Christmas morning with a decorated tree with presents under it and stockings hung by the chimney, family gathered around to celebrate their love for one another and their hope for our world and its people are visible and outward signs of a loving and caring God.

Over the years as I have talked to literally thousands of children, I have been absolutely amazed at some of the discussions the children and I have had. Of course, there are a few moments spent discussing the latest and greatest toy or video game that seems to be a "must have" item but once we get those preliminaries taken care of, there is almost always an opportunity for us to discuss some things that really matter. This is the part that I really enjoy-having a chance to have a real discussion with a precious child about themselves-what they enjoy doing, how school is going, how things are between them and their brother or sister, the importance of sharing and being respectful of the rights of others.

I am reminded of the six year old who, after Hurricane Katrina, responded to my question of what he would like for Christmas by stating, "I have plenty of toys and games, so I would like for you to give the

items you were planning to give to me to children who have nothing left because of the hurricane."

There was the five year old last week in Hayesville who said to me--"I need to tell you about my sister Hannah who is sick and could not come to see you tonight-she has been very good this year and I love her very much and I know that she would like to have a Barbie doll and some clothes for Christmas. Do you think you could bring her those things this year?"

And there was the little eight year old girl who said that all she wanted was for everyone to get along and be nice to one another.

What do these stories of children and their visits with Santa have to do with Advent, the first season of our church year?

I submit to you that they have a lot to do with Advent.

During this Advent season we are focused on making ourselves ready for the wonder of Jesus' birth. Advent is, then, a hopeful anticipation of Christ coming into our world-and a reminder that he will come again. This most magnificent time reminds us of the most precious gift of all-God's love for all of us in such magnitude that he sent his Son to share the good news with the world. The love, sharing, hope and caring represented by the birth of Jesus readily translates into the faces and lives of the children I see as Santa during the holidays. Anticipation, hope, love, gift sharing and doing for others are all manifestations of the love of God for each of us.

These precious and wonderful children, regardless of their circumstances, remind me in a bold and very direct fashion that my response to the call and anticipation of Advent is really a response to the unlimited gift of Grace in my life. God's Grace for each of us is a gift beyond measure and one that does not need bows or pretty ribbon to be complete but merely an affirmative response from each of us that we will love God, love one another and seek justice for all of God's children. I am reminded of this with each and every child that comes to me with wonder, hope and anticipation. As I look into their eyes and insert myself for a few brief seconds into their hearts and lives, I am seeking and confident that I am finding God in each and every one of these wonderful children.

My hope for all of us is a Blessed Advent and Christmas and that we each continue to find ways to serve the world and one another in ways that are pleasing to God. I close with a few simple thoughts

Live Simply.....

Love Generously.....

Care Deeply.....

Speak Kindly.....

Leave The Rest To God.

AMEN