

The Joy of a Pagan Christmas

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Christmas is a day of symbolic festivity. The symbolism is true and real, for it grows out of the human soul and human experience. It touches responsive cords in the very depths of human nature. Somehow, we can understand each other better on this day than we can on other days. All the reserves seem to fade away before the sunlight of the festival spirit. We forget all our cares and plunge with a right goodwill into the joy of the day. Sometimes it seems as if we become, for just this brief day, what we should be all the rest of the time. Perhaps the joy is the more keen because it comes so rarely and we cherish it the more because it gives us a taste of what we would like to be.

I said that this is a day of symbolic festivity. It is not particularly a Christian day, but a human day. It has absorbed into its symbols the customs, the cherished festivities of hopes of ages, and each single custom and association symbolizes a great human truth. I want to suggest something of that truth which is symbolized.

In the first place, we think of it as a day in which the giving of gifts symbolizes our love and well-wishing towards all men. In the days before Christianity, pagan Rome had a festival at this time of the year in which they celebrated the winter solstice. The Sun had turned his face toward the South again. The prophecy of summer had been declared. Warmth, planting, growing summer, and rich harvests could the people see in this one fact, that the Sun had returned toward them and was smiling on them again. So, the whole people gave themselves up to joy, and festivity. They gave gifts, and so far as they could, for this one day, they obliterated all class distinctions and met on a common human level, rejoicing in the common good fortune that the gods were giving to them all. To show their joy and goodwill

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

they gave gifts, and made merry, and played together as children. That old custom of Roman paganism still survives as one of the very choicest traditions of the ages. The giving of gifts as the symbol of goodwill strikes at the very heart of humanity. When official Christianity of the fourth century transformed this old nature festival of pagan Rome into a Christian festival, the real nature of the day was not changed. Christianity but added its contribution to the rich human symbolism that centuries of human life had developed.

The giving of gifts symbolizes goodwill among men. It was essentially a democratic impulse that stirred the custom. People went outside the conventional lines, expediency was thrown to the winds, and wherever there was a warm human touch that drew people together, there the fact of that fellow-feeling was symbolized by a gift. Master gave to slave, and, for one brief moment, declared the essential truth that convention and conditions tried to suppress. For one instant the spirit of life broke through the crust and flashed its message of democratic human fellowship across the barren arid lands of social restraint. Life became life, and deep sounded unto deep. The giving of gifts, the symbol of the spirit of human democracy, is the expression of the real spiritual ties that unite us. As we approach the Christmastime, we involuntarily feel our souls creep forth from their prisons of convention and limitations and traverse the wide world in search of those to whom they would express their goodwill. We are surprised sometimes to find the distant ones to whom it instinctively feels that its message must go. We are equally surprised and delighted by the messages that it receives. Nothing, I think, gives more wholesome delight than the stray message from the unexpected, unthought of person. The whole thing is a momentary communion of saints, the touch of the spirit of real life.

Inversely, it is the measure of ourselves. After it is all over, and the light has died away, and the things are again in their running order, take a moment to measure, not what you have received, nor indeed what you have given, but to measure the scope and far-reaching travels of your adventurous spirit of goodwill. It is not what we do that exalts us, but what we would do. As you think it over, just try to determine how adventurous your human spirit has been. How far did you journey in your feelings of goodwill? Did you go outside of the little circle of loved ones? Did you go outside of the little group of intimates,

of those whom you love all the time? Did you have a thought at least for the unfortunate and the outcast? In the midst of all your joy, did you not have one moment of appalling gloom and depression, because you could not shower the whole world with your joy, and your goodwill? Did you not have one single moment, when you would give all that you have and are that the whole wide world might become as joyous and deeply happy as you? If you did not do these things, if you did not go outside of your own dear ones, if you did not adventure out into the great world with your goodwill, then you may decide that you did not celebrate Christmas. So, not in the giving of gifts, but in your goodwill for this one day at least, be generous, but human, be divine. It is a day which symbolizes the spirit of goodwill to all men. Be a part of its real deeper spirit, drink its joy to the very bottom. Perhaps the adventure of your goodwill might break through the limitations of life and bring to all the earth a message of perpetual joy and happiness. Above all, let some bit of the dust and clutter of the day cling to your soul all through the year. The world needs it, and you need it.

Then from the Teutonic heathen we have cherished the custom of the Christmas tree. That is the symbol of perpetual life and hope when all about us lies buried in snow. When nature has gone to sleep for the long winter's rest, behold we cling tenaciously to the evergreen, with all its suggestion of warmth, life, and hope. Even when all the more brilliant delights of life seem to have fled for the time being, we fall back on the perpetual hope of life. The stolid, persistent, sighing evergreen. It keeps its vitality when all else has gone, and for that very reason it is precious, and is for us a perpetual symbol that even when life seems gone, nature is yet alive. Clustered about this tree is the rich tradition of our Teutonic ancestors. It is alive with all their long years of savagery, and growth in the forest of Europe. It speaks of the struggles with nature. It tells the tale of their hardships, of their battles, of their loves, of their religion, of their close life with nature, of their wild untutored days when the spirit of the living God was leading them through the wilderness to civilization. It carries us back to prehistoric times. I am glad that we still cherish in a natural human way such deep-seated, ingrained customs of the past. We are always true to the best in us, in our appreciation of the essential worth of the past. So, beneath all this Christmas tree, the gift of Teutonic heathenism, bespeaks the stolid faith in perpetual worth of life, and comes from the dim

past to tell us the tale of human life, of freedom in the time when the reindeer roared where Paris roars tonight. Freedom, life, hope, and achievement. Let it all soak in. Let the imagination carry us all back over the long trail, the home trail, of human history. Above all, let the spirit of it all find a place in our thought of this day. It will enrich us forever.

In the combination of the lighted evergreen tree and the gifts, we have the symbolization of the fusion of the two great streams of humanity that have made the modern world what it is. The faith, the hope, the love of freedom of the Teutonic, and the symbolism of democracy in the gift giving custom of the pagan.

But I do not forget that this is a Christian festival, as well as pagan. The contribution of Christianity becomes even more enriching in the light of all the pagan background. It gives the whole thing a truly human touch that reaches deep in our life experiences.

The old pagan festival, which through the ages, was transformed into the festival of Christmas, was the festival of Saturnalia. Among the gods whom the Romans worshipped was one named, Saturnus. He instructed them in agriculture, and other arts. By such education as he gave them, the people were accustomed to live in comparative comfort, and peace. This god was held in high esteem. Each year, at the time of the winter solstice a festival was held in honor of the God Saturnus, and the time when he taught his people the arts of civilization. As time went on, and the days when this god was supposed to have lived on earth became more remote, the people began to look back on those days as the "golden age." The poets sung of them as the happy time when sorrows and cares were unknown, when innocence, freedom and gladness reigned throughout²

² And here the manuscript ends, evidently incomplete. Or perhaps this last paragraph was just an alternate opening. No clue is left.