

The Spirit of Xmas

by Lloyd Robertson

As a child I was raised to believe that real Christians did not celebrate Christmas. We always had a Christmas tree with presents under it, however, even though my stepfather was an elder in our local fundamentalist church. Something about the holiday demanded its observance in some form, even by Christians who called the holiday "pagan".

We human beings are "meaning makers". This column is about the meaning of Christmas and how that meaning has changed over the centuries.

It turns out that the fundamentalist Christians were right. The old Roman feast to the god Saturn was held on December 17th, by modern calenders, and involved decorating houses with evergreens, giving presents and feasting. The "Feast of Mithras", a Roman transplant from the old Zoroastrian religion, was held on December 25. The pre-Christian Germanic peoples took the whole two week block from December 17th to the new year with feasting, partying, singing, wenching and drinking plenty of beer.

The early Christian church attempted to stamp out these "pagan" rituals in lands they controlled. The people, however, continued to celebrate the holidays. In the year 379 a frustrated Bishop of Constantinople proposed that a mass for Christ be held on the winter solstice but it was not until the 7th and 8th centuries that the belief that Christ was born on December 25th became widespread. The holiday remained but the accepted meaning of the holiday had evolved.

Christmas evolved again with the invention of Santa Clause in the middle of the 19th century. It is no coincidence that Santa became popular at the same time U.S. companies began pushing excess consumer goods into the market. In 1874 Macy's Department Store in New York led the parade with 10,000 manufactured dolls in a breathtaking store front Christmas display. At the same time customers were encouraged to wrap their presents in fancy, glittery paper thereby adding to the mystique of the gift - a very clever bit of marketing psychology. Santa became an instant "tradition" with people imagining that he had come from Dutch or Eastern European roots. Anyone who did not participate in this newer expression of Christmas was seen as a "grinch".

This is not to say that gifts had not been exchanged before Santa. But there were fewer gifts, usually home made, and they tended to be necessities rather than toys and luxury items.

The holiday season has been celebrated in one form or another for the past 3,000 years. What has remained constant, regardless of religious or economic system, is that this holiday has seen people come together in special ways that show caring for others. We renew friendships, express our feelings of love, and remember to have compassion for others. The holiday builds communities and families.

Unfortunately Christmas can be a depressing time for people who are alone. Many lack family ties or are marginalized in the community. For many it is simply not a holiday.

Kikinahk's Christmas hamper program and New Year's community supper are part of the holiday spirit building community. Such programs are open to everyone whether they be Christians who believe in Christmas, Christians who do not believe in Christmas or whether they be non-Christian altogether. Wouldn't it be a grand accomplishment if we could turn North America's major holiday into a celebration for everyone regardless of religion or race where everyone celebrates community in their own way. This why I, personally, would change the name of the holiday to "Xmas".

Merry Xmas everyone!