

**DECEMBER 24, 2011 CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY  
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**“CHRISTMAS BEHAVIOR”**

Most people are a bit nicer at Christmas time. You’ve noticed it in others and even in yourself. A dramatic example of this was in the Plain Dealer this morning and I heard about it going on nation-wide on a radio program a few days ago. The phenomenon is called “Lay-Away Santas”. In recent years, with the economic hard times, Lay-Away plans have become more popular again, especially for Christmas shopping. How they work is that a person has a store lay away, put aside, an item he wishes to buy by a certain date. The person will make monthly payments ahead of time and then, if he has kept up the payments, can go pick up the item just in time for Christmas. “Lay-Away Santas” are people who go to a store and ask to find out which families have fallen behind on their payment plans, especially families with lots of children. Then the Lay-Away Santa gets out his credit card or checkbook and pays off the remainder of the Lay-Away charges so the children can still get their Christmas presents. Some Santas do this for several families and they do it anonymously. One fellow in the Cleveland area spent thousands of dollars doing it this last week!

Yes, many people get better at Christmas. I call it “Christmas Behavior”. There is more giving and sharing at Christmas time (as proven by the Lay-Away Santa phenomenon). Strangers are friendlier and more cheerful to each other---you know you’re far more likely to have a conversation with a store clerk than at other times. People help the poor more---I see that here at St. Matthew’s as you do so much at this time to provide holiday food and gifts for struggling families both inside and outside the parish. Most people are less bossy and less crabby around Christmas. And people focus more on their families and spend more time with them. That’s what I call Christmas Behavior.

Why? Well, we know why the little ones have good Christmas Behavior. They’re worried about Santa Claus and his nice and naughty lists! But what about adults? Why this Christmas Behavior? My theory, my speculation, is that it happens because we, and most people around us, pay more attention to Jesus Christ in December---and I think that makes us better and nicer.

Now it’s true that there are many, often successful, attempts to secularize Christmas---but He is still there in the middle of it all. And there’s obviously way too much commercialization which can distract everyone from thinking about the baby Himself---but He’s still there under all the layers of commercialization and secularization.

For example, lots of outside Christmas lights and lawn displays all over the place right now.... We have some lights at my house, too. No offense to anyone, but some of it gets quite garish and even a bit ugly---especially those big, fat blow-up dolls of Santa or Frosty or reindeer. They look kind of nasty and emit hissing sounds due to the air being blown in! Earlier this week, Bonnie and I were driving Susie to a basketball game way over in Aurora. It was still light out and we were fighting bad traffic much of the way on Pleasant Valley Drive. While passing east through Walton Hills, we saw a strange sight on a huge front lawn. There were 50 or 60 of these huge, blow-up Christmas “dolls” in one yard---but they were all deflated. We commented on how odd that was and kept on going. After the game we were heading back west now on Pleasant Valley and it had gotten dark. We passed by that same yard again and now all 50 or 60 of the plastic behemoths were standing straight up and hissing away. Apparently, the family turned off the air machine in

the day and turned it back on again when the sun went down. It was actually quite ghoulish looking, even a little frightening, reminding me of a crowd scene in the old movie, “The Night of the Living Dead”.

But (now that I’ve dissed so bad on lawn displays) as you walk down your street and see Santa after Santa, deer after deer, etc., etc., fairly often you will see a beautiful nativity scene----and there right in the middle of all the other stuff, will lie a figure representing baby Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Under all the Christmas stuff, the baby is still there.

Back in early November, Suzie and I were in the car again (probably more basketball!) and she told me happily, “Dad, there’s a station on the radio that already plays nothing but Christmas music”. My response was “Yech! Christmas music in early November, even before Thanksgiving! That’s terrible! I want to listen to a talk-show”. Well, guess who won that little debate---I had the privilege of listening to Christmas carols about 2 weeks before Thanksgiving! And, of course, they haven’t stopped playing them yet.

Sometimes the repetition of the carols gets a bit much. It reminds me of something that happened back in the days of the Soviet Union. The Communists were sending an exploration expedition up into the Arctic in far northern Siberia. They would be there doing exploration for quite a while so the authorities decided to try to help them to avoid getting bored while trying to stay warm in their tents during those cold Siberian nights. They sent along a battery-operated record player with 50 records to play. But when the explorers opened up the box of records in Siberia they found out that somebody had goofed-----all 50 records were exactly the same! (in Spandau: The Secret Diaries, Albert Speer, MacMillan, 1976, p. 133)

If you’ve been hearing the common Christmas carols and songs over and over again ever since November you might be starting to feel a little like those poor Soviet explorers---that same song again?! And it is true that many of the more modern Christmas music makes no mention at all of Christ. But many of the carols actually are beautiful presentations of our Christian Faith, some even quite deep theologically. Do you hear them too much? Perhaps. But....listen to the words....and maybe you will be moved to give more attention to the Lord.

Last week one day I was in my usual place at 6 a.m., the Berea Rec. Center weight room. It’s a rather dank and dismal place—full of sweat and grunts and heavy metal music screeching on the radio. But this one morning, someone different than usual must have gotten control of the radio dial because suddenly there came forth a most beautiful rendition of one of the most beautiful Christmas carols, “Silent Night”. The Lord broke through to me right there on my weight machine that morning and I was quite inspired hearing those beautiful profound words I had heard so many thousands of times before. Even at 6 a.m. in the Berea Rec. weight room, God can speak through a Christmas carol. And I found myself paying more attention to the Lord in that weight room than I usually do.

And then a couple of days ago when I was doing some Christmas shopping I was walking into a big store and saw a Salvation Army bellringer just outside the door. She was a young woman, maybe about college age. And she wasn’t ringing her bell, she was singing. She was loudly singing “Angels We Have Heard On High”. With a good and loud voice she praised God right there in public with the words of that carol----“Gloria In Excelsis Deo”, “Glory to God on High”. Wow! How great to hear such a public and bold glorifying of our Lord! Again, God used a Christmas carol to break through to all around.

All those carols, seemingly never-ending, sometimes a bit mind-numbing-----yet, they bring

public attention to Jesus Christ. And just as advertising causes people to buy the thing advertised (otherwise, businesses wouldn't pay money for ads) so I think those carols often cause people, as they hear about Christ, to be nicer and better----"Christmas Behavior".

But then December 26 rolls around and Christmas Behavior starts to fade fast. There are those 12 Days of Christmas starting on December 25 but most people pay little attention to them----and so Christmas Behavior ends pretty quickly. For sure, by January it's gone!

But why should we Christians, worshippers of and followers of that little baby, stop Christmas Behavior? Why should we stop being better just because the calendar has moved on? After all, at the first Christmas, Jesus the baby didn't leave our world and us behind on the 13<sup>th</sup> day. He stayed in our world. He grew up. He saved the world. So why should we stop our Christmas Behavior just because Christmas leaves for another year?

I certainly don't mean we should leave our Christmas decorations up all year or be sure to sing carols in the summer. What I mean is that we should keep giving lots of attention to Christ even after Christmas. The world around us will certainly stop paying much attention to Him. But we're different, we're Christians. And so we shouldn't stop Christmas Behavior because we took down our tree.

Some examples of how to keep Christmas Behavior going-----

In December everyone is friendlier. Strangers on the street more often greet each other than they do the rest of the year. When you're shopping it's much more common to have some chit-chat with the clerk, even if it's only "Merry Christmas!" Talking to other people is a good thing---it may cheer someone up, shine a little light into their lives, and even open up an opportunity to talk about your Lord and your Faith with them. So keep it going January through November (except, of course, the "Merry Christmas" greeting!).

In December, most people make more time for their families. That is a good thing, to do more with your spouse, children, parents, etc. So keep it up January through November.

In December, most people do more to help the needy. It might be putting something in the Salvation Army bucket, it might be giving to the needy through ministries like we have here to get food and gifts to families needing help, it might be any one of various ways-----but it definitely happens more. Well, in January-November, there are still plenty of people needing help! So keep up the Christmas Behavior and help the needy all year long.

And in December, as we've already looked at, most people pay extra attention to Jesus Christ. You almost can't help it! Carols, carols, carols....Nativity scenes.....etc., etc..... It's easy in a way to pay attention to Christ at Christmas. But January through November? You'll have to work at it----no carols, no Nativity scenes to help out. How then can you keep paying attention to Jesus Christ? Prayer. Talk to him more and more---it's even better than hearing Christmas carols. And praying more and more to the Lord will help you keep that Christmas Behavior going as your prayers draw you closer to Him, even when it's not Christmas.

One hot August day a woman was walking down the street downtown and came upon a beggar. He was elderly, looked to be in poor health, and dressed in rags. He had a hat on the sidewalk for people to put money in and he was playing a harmonica. She was surprised that, in August, he was playing "Joy To The World". The woman said to the poor old fellow as she put some money in his hat----"I'm really surprised you're playing 'Joy To The World'. You look in pretty rough shape and I would guess you have not much to be joyful about----plus, it's August, not December!" The

beggar replied---“I’m very full of joy because I have Jesus. And I have him with me in August just as much as in December.” The joy of the Lord is definitely not meant just for a certain time of year!

Christmas Behavior----yes, most of us get a little nicer, a little better, at Christmas. With God’s help, let’s keep some Christmas Behavior going all year.

May the Christ of Christmas give you a blessed and merry Christmas and a 2012 full of good and holy Christmas Behavior!