

Let's Keep the Spirit of Christmas Going

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First Sunday of Christmas, December 30, 2007
Two More Christmas Gifts: Frank McKimie and Scott Newcomb

What a splendid week, and what a wonderful season! Christmas Eve was a real high point for everyone involved - musicians, vocalists, all of our worship leaders and helpers, including the Pastor, and, of course, God's people. We had two wonderful services, with Charlie Brown making a Christmas visit at the early service, and the Sanctuary filled at the second Traditional Candle-Light service. I loved that second service, both because it was full, and because I preached, which is what I like to do. But I also loved the earlier service, because I got to visit with Charlie Brown, and that *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* is truly a classic. What memories it brought back, and inspired with its light-hearted humor and keen insight.

How prescient was that 1965 scene with Charlie Brown and his sister Sally? "I've been looking for you big brother. Will you please write a letter to Santa Claus for me? You write it, and I will tell you what I want to say: Dear Santa Claus, How have you been? Did you have a nice summer? How is your wife? I have been extra good this year, so I have a long list of presents that I want. Please note the size and color of each item, and send as many as possible. If it seems too complicated, make it easy on yourself. Just send money. How about 10s and 20s?" Charlie's response was, "Good grief!" But, in fact, that's what our world has become! How many gift cards are found under Christmas trees nowadays? Asking for the green and giving it has become standard operating procedure forty-two years later!

I also loved the *Psychiatrist Is In* scene from the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. There was Lucy offering to help the hapless Charlie Brown, but not before he paid his five cents. "Boy, what a sound! I love hearing that old money clink, the beautiful sound of cold, hard cash, that beautiful sound of nickels, nickels, nickels, that beautiful sound of clinking nickels. All right, may I help you?" Charlie Brown then says, "I am in sad shape. I feel depressed. I know I should be happy, but I'm not." And then, there's Lucy's tell-tale bedside manner. "You know what your trouble is, Charlie Brown? The whole trouble with you is that you're you!" Charlie continues, "I have deep feelings of depression. What can I do?" Lucy's got the answer. "Snap out of it! Five cents, please."

Here's another gem from Lucy - Camp Counselor Extraordinaire: "Charlie Brown, life is like a deck chair on a cruise ship. Passengers open up these canvas deck chairs so they can sit in the sun. Some people place their chairs facing the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been. Other people face their chairs forward - they want to see where they're going. On the cruise ship of life, which way is your deck chair facing?" That's pretty profound. Charlie Brown takes just a moment to ponder, and then responds, "I've never been able to get those deck chairs unfolded."

Well, those last scenes were not from the Christmas special, but they made it into our common memory and Christian mindset through that other Charlie Brown classic of the 70's entitled *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. This popular commentary on the theology expressed through the cartoons of Charles Schulz became popular Sunday

School fare in churches all across America, really, all around the world. Schulz took great pride in his Christian faith. He was a life-long Sunday School teacher in the Church of God, and he understood Peanuts as a vocation, his calling in life. His was humor with a point. He was quoted as saying, "If you don't say anything in a cartoon, you might as well not draw it at all. Humor that doesn't say anything is worthless humor."

That certainly wasn't Charles Schulz, that wasn't Charlie Brown, and that wasn't what you'd find in *Peanuts*. Here is what a number of commentators have observed countless times in talking about Charles Schulz and *Peanuts*: "In a single comic strip Schulz could summarize volumes of theological thinking." Take the issue of human suffering, for instance. While tomes have been written on the subject, he brought it down to earth in a series of episodes that could have been entitled *How Children Learn to Lose*. It started with a baseball game, one of several hundred that Manager Charlie Brown would lose over the years.

Charlie Brown is on the pitcher's mound looking pretty unhappy. "Nine home runs in a row! Good grief! What can I do? We're getting slaughtered again. Schroeder, I don't know what to do. Why do we have to suffer like this?"

Schroeder then says, "Man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward."

"What?" Charlie Brown asks, with eyes rolling.

Linus then pipes in, "He's quoting from the Book of Job, Charlie Brown, seventh verse, fifth chapter. Actually, the problem of suffering is a very profound one."

Lucy then chimes in, "If a person has had bad luck, it's because he's doing something wrong. That's what I always say."

Schroeder responds, "That's what Job's friends told him. But I doubt it. I think a person who never suffers, never matures. Suffering is actually very important."

Lucy is not impressed. "Who wants to suffer? Don't be ridiculous!"

"But pain is a part of life," Schroeder continues.

Linus jumps back in: "A person who speaks only of the patience of Job reveals that he knows very little of the book..."

"Good grief!" Charlie Brown sighs. "I don't have a ball team. I have a theological seminary!"

I've got to admit that I immediately thought of Zion's Coed Softball Team, and the kind of theologizing that goes on as folks stumble around the bases for the greater glory of Zion. It's not just the softball team. There are lots of groups and lots of places where we're talking about our faith and living it through the praise that we offer, the work that we do, the responsibilities we assume, the commitments we make to growing in grace and living God's love. Charles Schulz loved the church, and he didn't mind sharing this Good News with America, with the world. That's what he meant when he said, "If you don't say anything in a cartoon, you might as well not draw it at all." You don't have to hit someone over the head with your faith in order to share it. You just need to know what God desires of us - to love your neighbor, even when your neighbor is Lucy.

Well, as I said, we've enjoyed a splendid season and a wonderful Christmas.

Fortunately, we've saved the best for last. This morning, we will take some time to celebrate one final Christmas present before the season and the year comes to a close.

God has blessed us with a great grasp of our mission to grow in love and to grow in service by receiving, relying on, and growing in God's grace. It's always nice when others can see what God is doing among us, and want to join in and share our fellowship in the gospel. We are happy to welcome Frank McKimie and Scott Newcomb into our ranks, to receive them as co-workers in the cause of God's

kingdom and as full partners in the life of our church. Earlier this year it was the Keating family, and then Nick and Juanita Cignetti, along with Craig Kuehnert, too. We are thankful for all of them.

Our job is to continue to listen to what God is calling us to do, and to make room for these newer members whom God has added to our team. Frank and Scott, we are encouraged by your desire to join us, and we know that God will strengthen us through the gifts, the energy, and the commitment that you add to the mix. You are a part of the theological seminary God has assembled here at Zion. We just call it a church family, a family that knows how to live the faith we like to talk about. Sometimes, it's through singing our praise at worship. At other times, it's raking the leaves, trimming the bushes, and cleaning the beds. If you're a ballplayer, we've got a great softball team.

Wherever it happens, we know that God will bless you and God will bless us as we never tire of learning how to invite Jesus to leave the crib of the manger behind and enter into our lives as Lord and Savior. As the kids said in their Christmas program a couple of weeks ago, "The birth of the baby in Bethlehem paved the way for the birth of Christ living in our hearts." When the spirit of Christmas comes to life in us, we become signs pointing the way to true life. The trick with Christmas is learning how to get caught up in the spirit of Christmas all year long. Actually, it's not a trick. The Bible calls it discipleship. We call it living our lives, day by day ... in Jesus' name.

Amen

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