

## **“A PERFECT CHRISTMAS?” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, December 17, 2017**

Over the past few days the Advent season has been heating up – even as the outdoor temperature has been cooling down. For many of us there is a whirl of activity ahead. This is a time in which party after party seems to beckon – all meant to celebrate the joy of the season. Unfortunately, the abundant festivities of Advent and Christmas among family and friends don't necessarily translate into happy times for us. Instead, many people end up stressed out. It's all too much for them. The peace, love, and joy that we talk about at Advent and Christmas time seem elusive.

Of course, one of the reasons may be sheer over-activity on our part. Just like the proverbial kid in a candy store, it is tough for us to say “no” to all the opportunities which Advent and Christmas provide us to do all kinds of interesting and not-so-typical things. We end up running around so much that we can't really relax and enjoy the season. There's literally no time to catch our breath.

On the other hand, there may be an even deeper and profounder problem at work in the stress that people report. If the truth be told, some of us folks have a very glossy and hyped image of what Christmas should be. We believe that Christmas is supposed to be magical. Consequently, an awful lot of people completely exhaust themselves trying to make sure that Christmas is going to be perfect or ideal.

Is this quest for perfect or ideal Christmas a new problem? I don't think so. Of course, everything may be more extreme today, particularly when social media and all its commercial hype shapes encourages so many of our outsized expectations. But, honestly, the quest for perfect or ideal Christmas has been around for a long time. And along with this quest comes a lot of needless, even silly anguish and discontent – as I can attest from some personal experience.

I grew up in a Polish-German family where Christmas celebrations were a big thing – huge, in every sense of the word. My various aunts and uncles all took it upon themselves to host their own Christmas party for the entire extended family. Over the week between December 24 and January 1, life for our family clan was a movable feast as we rotated from one household to the next to celebrate Christmas. Everybody went all out in the quest for just the right

Christmas party. The results were often aesthetic treat that could give a style guru like Martha Stewart a run for her money. But there was often a big emotional and spiritual price tag on this “Christmas beautiful” package that I’m not so nostalgic about. A certain amount of tension prevailed as everybody in the family tried to keep up with everybody else, as well as live up to their own image of a perfect Christmas.

Admittedly, not too much was said aloud. Nevertheless, there was a kind of competition and rivalry between family households at Christmas time, akin to a state fair where blue ribbons are handed out for “the best” in different categories. Who had the nicest interior or exterior decorations? Who had the shapeliest and best ornamented tree? Who had the most original array of Christmas cookies, pies, and other baked goods? Who set the best table?

Sort of hilarious isn’t it? Yet these were the matters that preoccupied everybody—at least the adults in our family. Sad to say, all this competitiveness in the quest for the perfect or ideal Christmas created an environment where a tactless remark could be interpreted as it dig – with feelings consequently hurt. In retrospect, I regard it as one of the miracles of Christmas that the message of Jesus Christ was not completely lost amid all of our family hoopla!

As I got older, witnessing the rivalry for a “perfect Christmas” year after year, I came to the simple conclusion that the whole quest for the perfect or the ideal Christmas time was misguided. In trying to get things “just right” for Christmas, we ran the perennial risk of getting them all wrong. Today, I continue to believe that Christmas will stress and distress any of us out unless we dig deeper, spiritually speaking, and get more and more touch with its real meaning and message.

Ironically, if we really think about it, Christmas is very little to do with the perfect or the ideal in our here-and-now world. The whole backdrop or setting for the Christmas story is a world of imperfect men and women, lost in sin, despair, hurt, and conflict. The Christmas story itself is a saga of how God in his great love for his own creation sent his own son to us in infant form in order to save us from the worst in ourselves. Jesus’s role was to take away the sins of the world. His great mission was to lift from our hearts our own sense of overwhelming guilt and failure that can separate us from God and hinder us from being good.

Yet God never promised us that the world would immediately become perfect just because Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Nor did God suggest that Jesus would make us perfect people or even capable of perfection. Very differently, God's message to us through his son Jesus Christ is that our experience of any kind of perfection comes only in moments of grace that he makes possible. Genuine and lasting perfection for us as human beings will have to await the final consummation of his own kingdom at end of the age.

As Christmas comes closer and closer this year, we can join the parade in pursuit of an ideal or "perfect" Christmas according to worldly hype. Or we can step back and get more real in our celebration of Christ's birth. Enjoying a real Christmas means recognizing that we are not perfect. And our Christmas will probably never be either. It also means taking to heart the good news, proclaimed with Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, that God really does love us in spite of our own imperfections and calls us to love others despite their imperfections.

Yes, with the assurance of God's acceptance and love, we don't have to use the Christmas season to prove anything to ourselves or anybody else. Instead, we can relax and be ourselves. We can also focus more at Christmas on simply being here for others while showing and sharing the love that God also wants to see embodied in our lives in this season and every season.

Ultimately, only love shared can make our Christmas perfect. As men and women who worship Jesus Christ as God's love incarnate—made flesh—may we give our our greatest attention and heart to loving everybody more and in taking joy in Jesus and each other's company as we celebrate his birth anew. **Amen.**