

## MAY YOUR DAYS BE MERRY AND BRIGHT

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So how many people love Christmas and think that it is the happiest time of the year? How many people? How many people like Christmas, but also acknowledge it can be a difficult time for a lot of people? How many people are really not that into Christmas? You don't care; you could have it or not have it. Anybody in that?

You know, in our culture, Christmas is not only seen as the happiest time and the happiest season, there's a lot of societal pressure on us to be happy. A lot of societal pressure for us to feel good. And pressure to celebrate Christmas in certain ways. The biggest pressure, of course, is to buy gifts. To buy presents for family and friends, for people at work. And also, there's pressure to put up your lights, put up a tree, decorate not only inside your house, but outside your house, as well. Pressure to send cards, to bake cookies, to dress up in red or green. Or drink eggnog, or make eggnog, or go to your staff Christmas party. Or go to your neighbor's Christmas party. Or host your own Christmas party.

How many people ever saw "Christmas with the Kranks"? Anybody know that? It's about a couple that they're empty nesters, and they want to go on a cruise for Christmas. So they decide not to do Christmas. Then they advise all their friends and people in the neighborhood that they won't be putting up a tree or doing any of the decorating. And their tradition of putting Frosty – the balloon Frosty – up on their roof. And these people lose their stuff! They begin to ostracize, intimidate, harass and pressure this couple into putting up their tree and doing the whole Christmas thing. Then they changed their mind – after not treating them well – change their mind and decide to have their annual Christmas Eve party. Then everybody becomes nice again and helps them to conform and do Christmas the way it should be done.

I mean, there is pressure on us in how we do Christmas and to do Christmas. Oh, and it doesn't end there. The songs put a lot of pressure on being happy. *"It's the most wonderful time of the year."* A lot of pressure. *"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way."* Not halfway; we're jingling all the way. [Congregants laugh] *"Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh."*

And how about deck the halls? *"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la la la la la. 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la la."* It is not just holly; it's jolly. [Congregants laugh]

And "O Come All Ye Faithful": it's just not joyful, it's *"and triumphant,"* too.

But it gets even worse! Here's the most intimidating song, most pressurized song to be happy. And here are the words: *"You better watch out."* [Congregants laugh] *"You better not cry. You better not pout, and I'm telling you why."* Because he's coming! He is coming. [Laughs]

And while I'm clearly being a little bit silly, the underlying truth is that, at Christmas time, there are a lot of stresses. There are a lot of pressures to get a lot of stuff done that we're expected to get done. There's a lot of rushing and cramming and hustling to meet that deadline – to just finish under the deadline – to get in there that it's all complete on December 25th. And after Christmas, most of us are exhausted. We're sick of Christmas songs. You know, we're sick of Christmas movies. And we're just tired and we're happy it's done and over with.

You know, the fact is: Christmas is not always the happiest time for some people. It's a hard time; not a happy time. Some people are moving through grief and through the loss of a loved one. Some people, you know; it triggers anxiety and depression and past trauma. Loneliness – maybe the first Christmas without a loved one; first Christmas after a divorce. You know, maybe it triggers family conflict and

financial stresses – that we can't afford to do all these things. And sometimes the pressure is so strong, we will go into debt to keep up with the appearances and participating in these different areas.

All of the stuff that goes on at Christmas can be overwhelming.

You know, we all know the carol, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Last week, I saw a movie called "Fake Yourself a Merry Christmas." [Congregants laugh] And it was about a woman who was alone for the holidays. And there's a guy that – he fell at a coffee shop there. And she was kind; wanted to go with him. And he was in a coma. They didn't really actually know each other at all. But then it turns out that the doctor that was treating this guy that was unconscious was her ex-boyfriend. So, she did not want him to know she was alone for the holidays, so she pretended and faked a relationship with a guy in a coma to impress this doctor. [Congregants laugh]

I mean, sometimes the pressure to not just be happy, but to have people see you as being happy, is so strong, we act in inauthentic ways. We will put on a nice face, a nice smile; say how good we are and how wonderful Christmas is. Because we don't want to look bad. We'd rather fake a Merry Christmas than not have one at all.

In the song, "White Christmas," my favorite line is: "*May your days be merry and bright.*" What a lovely affirmation. What a lovely intention. "*May your days be merry and bright.*"

The song, "White Christmas," debuted on December the 25th, 1941, on a radio show hosted by Kraft Foods. Yes, Kraft macaroni-and-cheese food – that company – hosted it. And Bing Crosby was the singer. And then that thing became so popular. Do you know it is still today the greatest selling Christmas song in history? Oh, but even more! It is actually the greatest song in history – in all songs, and all types of songs.

And it is a song that reminisces about an old-fashioned Christmas. There is a sadness and a yearning for an experience that once was. And being away from your family; you know, kind of being distant. And there's a sadness of it and wishing it could be better. It could be bright. It could be merry and bright.

And so, Bing Crosby did not like singing that song, particularly when he went overseas. And to the troops, it was a number one requested song. And he felt bad, because it made them feel sad.

But here's another interesting thing. The writer of the song, Irving Berlin – his son, who was three weeks old, died on December the 25th, 1928. So, 10 or 12 years later, he was asked to write this song. And every December 25th, he and his wife went to the graveside. And so, when he was asked to write this song that would be performed on December the 25th, his melancholy certainly came through the writing of this song about his yearning for something that he doesn't have anymore. Yearning for something that is distant.

But what I like about this is: that, even in sadness, even if you're feeling distant, even if it's a tough time, there's still that intention of, "*May your days be merry and bright.*"

And so, this morning, what I want to share with you is three things we can do when we're having difficulties at Christmas – when it is not an easy time – to do to help us make our days as merry and bright as we can.

So, the first thing we need to do is to **PRACTICE GOOD SELF-CARE**. That kind of sounds kind of wishy-washy, doesn't it? Self-care is a good way to make your days merry and bright? But the fact is: self-care is absolutely vital to our health and happiness. Self-care is absolutely vital to us being the best of ourselves for the people in our lives. The best thing you can do for your spouse is take care of yourself. The best thing you can do for your children is to take care of yourself. For people at work, in your community is take care of self.

Self-care seems to have a bit of a negative connotation – like you're soft or you're weak because you need self-care. Sometimes we think it's selfish. But it is not selfish; it is actually sacred. And it is vital, and it is an absolute priority if we want to live our best lives.

Sometimes society will say, *“Do more, buy more, work more, eat more, decorate more.”* Everything is always on the “more.” But Spirit says, *“Be still and know that I am God.”* One of the most powerful aspects of self-care is to quiet the mind, and to refuel and renew by immersing your mind in the Mind of God. By connecting to the Source of peace; the Source of love; the Source of joy.

You know, our souls are saying: Don't pretend, don't fake, don't be inauthentic. Practice Presence. Practice knowing your oneness with the Presence and Power of Spirit. Know your true self, your authentic self, your spiritual self.

1 Corinthians 3 says, *“You are the Temple of the living God; the Spirit of God, dwells in you.”*

One of the greatest ways we can honor God is to honor our body temple. This is the vehicle – the gift – through which we have been given to experience and express life. It is a great way to honor ourselves.

Sometimes the aspects of self-care are so basic, we don't take it seriously. So let me ask you a few now. Are you getting enough sleep? Are you eating a well-balanced, healthy diet? Are you getting enough exercise? Are you saying no to over-committing yourself? Are you taking breaks? Are you doing something fun and playing?

But here's the most important one. Are you being kind and gentle to yourself? Are you having compassion for yourself? And are you being patient with yourself? Because sometimes we can beat ourselves up and be brutal on ourselves when we are not acting or living up to some level or standard.

Sometimes we need to pause and ask ourselves a question: Where in me needs some care and attention? What in me needs to be nurtured or needs healing? What in me needs to let go and release it? Or what is it I can do to nourish and support myself and take better care of myself through the holidays? What would it take for me to have an enjoyable, well-balanced holiday season?

Maybe it's to get more exercise. Maybe it's to see your therapist during the holidays. Maybe it's to read more or do more meditation. Maybe it's to take a daily nap. Maybe it's to drive around your neighborhood and see the lights. Maybe it's to watch more Hallmark movies. Christmas movies! Or maybe to stop watching them! [Congregants laugh] I don't know ...

So what can you do to practice good self-care during this holiday season? Because it will not only make you feel merry bright, it will make the people around you merry and bright, as well.

The second thing we can do is to **CREATE NEW CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS**. In Unity, we are always reminding ourselves –and one of our principles is – we are co-creators. We are creators!

And so that, if Christmas isn't working, and it is not as meaningful and fulfilling as we would like it to be, we can create some new experiences, some new traditions around our Christmas. We don't have to be stuck in the same traditions. We can create a new Christmas experience based on the context of what's going on in our lives right now; based on what is our specific needs and dynamics. And to be able to support those in the right way, rather than just falling into the cookie-cutter way that we have acted and behaved and experienced Christmas.

Tradition is beautiful! But tradition is meant to serve us, not imprison us.

A woman comes home with a leg of ham. And she's preparing it for Christmas. And then she cuts off a third of the leg. And so, she grew up with her mom doing that same tradition: they cut off a third of the

leg. And so, she wondered, *“Why do we do that? What's the reason we cut that off before we bake that ham?”*

She calls her mom and says, *“Mom, why do we do that?”*

She says, *“Well, I actually don't know. My mom did it all the time. It was just our family tradition.”*

And so, she calls her grandma and says, *“Grandma, why did you teach mom to cut off a third of the leg of the ham before we baked it?”*

And she says, *“Well, when your mom was a little girl, our oven was so small. We couldn't fit it all in, so we had to cut a third of it just to get it cooked.”*

And that sounds like a silly thing, but sometimes we're doing traditions that we're so attached to that we think we have to do it. You don't have to! You can create your own tradition. You can create new experiences in Christmas. You are not bound to the past. You can create new: new tradition.

And every Christmas does not need to look the same. New traditions we can create include this: we can have a Christmas hike or nature walk. We can create maybe a Christmas picnic. Maybe we can – instead of hosting Christmas – maybe we could travel. And if we travel for Christmas, maybe we can host. Maybe it's about trying to bake healthier Christmas foods and snacks. Maybe it's trying culture – food from a different culture. If you're not into the turkey and stuffing thing, maybe you can have a seafood Christmas or sushi Christmas or Indian food Christmas or steak Christmas. Why do we need to limit it to one?

That's tradition. If you're enjoying it, great! But why not try something else and create something new? Maybe having no gifts and focusing on experiences together. When my nieces and nephews – which I have 21 of them – but at the time when there was only like about six or seven, is that I would not buy them gifts because there were 10 of us and there were parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. They got gifts! And so, I would take them all to a movie and then take them out for pizza. It was so fun, and it was so wonderful. And I felt good creating an experience for them.

And so, maybe we could play games. Maybe we could have a Christmas puzzle. Maybe we could have a Christmas home-made ice cream contest. Rollerblading. You know, anything! We can create literally anything we want.

I know a friend who's got a gingerbread contest with her kids. I mean, there are all kinds of things that we can do. Maybe lighting candles and sharing our gratuities instead of Christmas. Maybe have a Christmas jam session. Like, if you and your buddies play music, maybe have a little Christmas jam session together.

Or you can revive old childhood memories that you used to do. Like, my mom used to bake homemade bread on Christmas Eve. Oh, it smelled so good! And with some butter on it, we just ate that. And it was just so, so good. We used to make ginger beer and snow angels. That was back in Canada ... [Congregants laugh] But you know what I'm saying! Whatever was a tradition back then, I mean, why not try and revive it now?

You know, Christmases can look different and yet be still wonderful. But you've got to be willing to be a little bit creative and flexible. You know, sometimes we can be ... Because life does not always go the way that we want. Sometimes there are surprises; sometimes things just happen that we're totally unexpected. And we can't be rigid and inflexible. Because otherwise, you know what that's going to lead us to? Frustration, upset and disappointment. You know, we think our Christmas got ruined because it didn't go the way that we wanted. No! It just went differently. And it still can be good! Trusting that all things are working together for our highest good; that there is divine order there.

You know, I've mentioned this old Beatitude that they didn't use that they really should of. And it's, *"Blessed or the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape."* [Congregants laugh]

When my dad died, it was a tough time for us. And somebody had recommended: do not try and repeat the same kind of Christmas you did when your dad was alive; do something different. Amazingly, my brothers and sisters decided to do very different, and I went to Texas to a ranch to have Christmas, where my friend invited me. My brother and his daughter went to Nigeria, where one of my sisters was living. Three of them went to Trinidad to celebrate there. And some of them stayed in Toronto.

Christmas looked different. We were all on the phone, calling all over the world to connect with each other on Christmas Day. And it was different, but it was wonderful in its unique way.

Two of my sisters, Ingrid and Denise, came to visit me in North Carolina; spent Christmas with me. The electricity went out on the 24th and the 25th – all day for both. We ate cold lasagna, heated up by candlelight. We were under blankets, and we laughed and told stories. And still to this day – it was different, but it was wonderful. We still talk about it!

My sister, Cheryl, when we were younger, she was a nurse. And she worked on Christmas Day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. We had to get up at 5 or 5:15 to have breakfast with her as a full family so she could go to work. And we did not open presents until after dinner – 7:30, after she had arrived back. And it's still memorable. It was different. It was wonderful and fun.

For a few years, I volunteered the chaplaincy department at the Hamilton Detention Center for juvenile offenders. I raised money to buy them chocolates and socks and soap and all the thing you were legally allowed to give them. And my parents and family would allow us to have breakfast and then in time so I could make it down to the jail. It was different and it was wonderful.

The fact is: life is going to be different. Things aren't going to go the way we want. But we have the two powers: the creative ability to change and create something new, and the ability to roll and adapt by being flexible. Both of those will absolutely help that all of our Christmas days are merry and bright.

The last one to do is to **SERVE, SUPPORT AND HELP OTHERS**. You know, the greatest thing we can do for ourselves is to help somebody else. The best way to soften our own pain, our own grief and our own suffering is to help somebody deal with their grief and their pain and their suffering. The best way to experience the light and the peace and the love of God is to share your light, your peace, and your love, your kindness, and your generosity. Because it opens us up to the flow of the eternal goodness of Spirit.

You know, Buddhists say that the key to happiness – the thing that we're all seeking and searching for, the key to happiness – is compassion. It's about taking your attention away from your own life and channeling it for the well-being of someone else or something else. That is the most powerful way to bring more happiness and joy and goodness into our lives. That, when we actually are compassionate and giving and supporting of others, it expands the goodness and love for all of us.

Jesus said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* And the reason he said that is that, when you receive, you can just receive. But when you give, you activate a universal force. You activate it! When there is giving, there will be receiving. because you are tapping into a spiritual and divine law.

And whether it's serving or supporting, or giving or expressing compassion, all of it is doing good and creating goodwill for all.

A man said, *"Christmas was the worst time of the year for me after my wife passed. I decided one year to volunteer at a shelter on Christmas morning."* He said, *"That was the first time I felt lighter since losing her. Not because my pain left, but because my love and my heart opened and began to flow again."*

You know, sometimes we think that serving, sometimes we think that giving and volunteering – it's heavy; it's hard; it's time-consuming; it'll take a lot out of us. It actually gives a lot to us. It energizes us. It uplifts us. And it makes us actually feel more alive. It taps into that level of purpose and then the reason that we are all here: which is to love one another; to help one another.

One of the greatest things we can all do is to consciously develop the heart of a servant – of always looking for ways: little ways that we can help or lighten or support or encourage somebody in our lives. Maybe even letting someone in traffic. Maybe opening a door or buying a stranger or a friend a cup of coffee. Texting someone a compliment. Smiling. Sending a silent blessing, Saying something positive and uplifting. Giving someone a hug or appreciating the people that are in your life. Or just being grateful that you get to serve; that you get to support; and that you get to help others.

You know, serving and supporting and helping others does not eliminate all of your sorrow and pain, but it can transform it into light, into awareness, into compassion and understanding.

Mother Teresa said, *"If we want to make this a better world, a way to do it is small acts of kindness done with great love."*

So, who can you help? Who can you serve? Who can you support in your home, outside your home, or anywhere this Christmas?

As Christmas was approaching, little Johnny asked his mom for a new bike. She told him, *"The best idea for you, I think, is for you to write Santa a note."*

And he said, *"Well, I just did the nativity scene in play, so I think I'd like to write to Baby Jesus."*

The mom said, *"Okay; that sounds good."*

And so Johnny went to his room and he wrote, *"Dear Jesus, I have been very good. A very good boy. And I would like to have a bike."*

And so, he thought about it. He read it a couple of times, and that didn't feel like the most honest thing. So, then he wrote another one: *"Dear Jesus, I have been a good boy most of the time and would like a bike."*

He read it and he thought, *"Well, you know, that's not completely true."* And then his next one was, *"Dear Jesus, I could be a good boy if I tried and especially if you gave me a new bike."* [Congregants laugh]

And he read that and he still wasn't satisfied. He was frustrated. So, he tried to go for a walk. He walks around the block And he sees this little nativity scene in the front of somebody's house, and there's a little small statue of the Virgin Mary in front of the house. So, he walks up to it, and he kind of looks both sides, grabs it and puts it under his coat, takes it home, and puts it under his bed. And then he wrote, *"Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again" ...* [congregants laugh] *"you'd better give me a bike."* [Congregants laugh]

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year, but it can be difficult. It can be a hard and challenging time for many. And so, the best way to make Christmas the best time – the best time we can – and, quite frankly, all year around, is to do these three things:

Practice good self-care. Take care of yourself. This is the temple of the living God that we are. And the better we take care of our stuff, the better we'll feel, and the better we'll be available for others.

Create new Christmas traditions. If it isn't working for you, use the ones that are still working, but create new ones to match the context that your in. And be willing to be flexible and adaptable because Christmases can be different *and* still all wonderful.

And then finally: serve, support and help others. Give of your heart. Give of your love. Give of yourself. And that love – through that giving in all of its forms – will expand for us all.

If you're having a hard time this Christmas, I would truly recommend practicing these three wonderful actions, because they will all help make your days merry and bright.

God bless you all!

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