

## FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

24 December 2011, St. Bartholomew's, Livermore, CA

The Rev. Debra Low-Skinner

In this day and age of flash mobs and men dropping down on one knee "Tebowing", comes the hot new trend that started in this nation's heart-land, and has spread and gone viral all over the country in just a couple of weeks. I'm talking about the phenomenon of good-hearted persons doing random acts of generosity. I'm talking about these people going into their local Kmart's and then plunking down some-times impressively large sums of money to payoff the layaway accounts of complete strangers. All this so that persons in the working class 99%, who are struggling to make ends meet, can provide clothing and toys for their children and make Christmas just a little more merry for them. The media are calling these anonymous benefactors "Secret Santas" and "Layaway Angels".

It all started on December 7<sup>th</sup> near Grand Rapids, MI, when a woman went into a Kmart and gave \$500 to pay off the layaway accounts of three people she did not know. She looked for accounts with toys put on layaway, so she could help out families with children. When that good news story hit the airwaves via TV, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs, other people were inspired to do the same thing:

- The next day, a man elsewhere in Michigan went into a Kmart and gave \$2000 to clear 14 layaway accounts.
- Four different persons went separately on different days into the same Kmart store in Alton, IL. Together they gave hundreds of dollars to pay off five layaway accounts.
- One woman in Englewood, CO had gone to a pawn shop to pawn something she owned, so that she could have money to pay off her account balance. When she got to Kmart, she was told that a Secret Santa had already paid off her account.
- At the Kmart in Concord, CA, a woman came in with her grandson, who wanted to give \$18 to pay for someone's layaway.
- A widow went into a Kmart in Indianapolis and paid for layaway items of 50 people. She said that, "Bringing joy to others was a beautiful tribute to her late husband. (And) the joy of helping others helped ease her pain at this difficult time of the year..." (NEagle.com, 12/19/11)
- Last Saturday in Hayward, CA, a man went into Kmart with \$10,000 in cash. He paid all but a few cents of everybody's layaways, especially delinquent accounts and gifts for children and toys. After he was done, he had \$200 leftover and dropped the money into the Salvation Army kettle just outside the store. (KGO-TV, 12/17/11)

Using Google, I saw scores of similar Secret Santa stories occurring in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Virginia, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Alabama, California, and even politically-jaded Washington DC. Sometimes the stores were Walmarts, but mostly they were Kmart's.

Kmart representatives told the Associated Press (12/17/11) last week that they did nothing to instigate the secret Santas or spread word of the generosity. The Vice President of Layaways said that Kmart may be the focus of layaway generosity, because it is one of the few large discount stores that have offered layaway year-round for about four decades.

A Kmart assistant store manager in Omaha said, "To be honest, in retail, it's easy to get cynical about the holidays, because you're kind of grinding it out, when everybody else is having family time. It's really encouraging to see this side of Christmas again." (AP, 12/17/11)

A Kmart store employee in Englewood, CO, said "The economy is awful. There's not much money around as there used to be, so it's mind-blowing that people are stepping up like this." ("Denver Post", 12/20/11),

A Secret Santa told the “Denver Post” (12/20/2011) that “So much is on the news about class warfare. We need to do stuff that brings people together.”

A Kmart assistant store manager in Michigan said, “(The Secret Santa thing is) wonderful. It’s just brought back the true spirit of Christ-mas.” (“Grand Rapids Press”, 12/14/11)

How much at this time of the year, especially tonight on Christmas Eve, do we really want to reconnect with the “true spirit of Christ-mas”! That comforting feeling that good things can still happen to good people. The assurance that “God is still with us” (Emmanuel). The trust we have (or want to have) that the angels of God will protect and guide us through the dark times and that they will prevail over evil and over our secret doubts and fears. And the inner knowing that Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is reborn in our hearts each and every Christmas and that he loves us with an everlasting love.

I think that, whether or not these Secret Santas and Layaway Angels are true believers and Christians, they certainly have given us Christ-ians a reminder of our baptismal vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” (BCP, 417)

I am reminded of that passage in the Gospel of Matthew (6:6, 19-21), where Jesus said to his disciples, “...Whenever you pray, ... pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ... Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

We can thus imagine a modern-day manger scene where, by the ministrations of a Secret Santa, gifts from Kmart--as treasured as if they were gold, frankincense, and myrrh--will be presented tonight to a poor child, who was born to two humble working-class parents far from home. A mother and father who are doing the best they can to keep body and soul together and to live in obedience with God’s will.

I think that Jesus Christ, who really is “the reason for the season”, is incarnate in the hearts of Secret Santas and Layaway Angels every-where and also in the hearts of the people benefitting from such anonymous generosity. We are reminded that Christ said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

And we are reminded of the words of the Letter of James of Jerusalem (1:17, NRSV) that: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

I know how often people decry the crass commercialism and financial pressures to buy-buy-buy for Christmas, but the very thought and act of giving something meaningful to others reminds us of how gifted we are by God many blessings. How doing a generous act, whether in secret or in the open, is a divine imitation of the generosity of “the Father of lights.” And how Christ gave himself up for us as the perfect gift, so that all might be reconciled and lovingly bound to God the Father once and for all.

Let us pray: Bless, O Lord, all thy gifts to our use and to our neighbors’ use, and us to your service, to your glory and for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.