Who took the Christ out of Christmas?

The subtitle for today’s sermon is, “Is Christmas too commercial?”

I started seeing bumper stickers lamenting Christ being taken out of Christmas maybe in the 70’s. Looking up bumper stickers today there is an array of complaining—Use Christmas not Happy Holidays. Keep Christ out of Saturnalia—which is the ancient Roman holiday to honor the god Saturn and the winter solstice on December 17th extending to December 23. Happy Birthday Jesus. Bumper stickers to give and to take offense about the holidays.

Originally I think the complaint about taking Christ out pointed to the abbreviation of Christmas by writing Xmas as the source of the problem. The heathens had “X’d” Christ out. Well, further research indicated some problems with this theory and complaint. The abbreviation dates back to the 16th century, it isn’t a recent trend. Now they probably had some heathens, even back in the 16th century, but not exactly the targets of our 20th century wrath. It seems the X is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ. Another rant ruined by facts! It is amazing what we find when we go looking for the truth.

I noticed, as some others have, if you take Christ out, you are left with mas. Which if you add an accent above the “a”, mas is Spanish for more or most. Now this might get us some traction. You may have noticed that Christmas, and even Hanukkah by many accounts, has turned into a celebration of more. More gifts. More food. More drink. More parties. More decorations and lights. More expectations. More depression. More and more and more.

The quest for more has encroached on our one day a year for gratitude. Instead of spending the day with others, sharing our good and being grateful for what we already have, many people skip dinner and stand in lines for sales at stores. A few stores this year went against the tide and refused to be open and begin sales on Thanksgiving. But many stores continued to be open. And the shoppers filled the aisles again.

So some would like to blame Mr. Macy or Sam Walton of Walmart for taking Christ out of Christmas and turning the holiday into a celebration of more. It is so easy to point the finger of blame at someone else. Yet who is celebrating? Who is shopping? Who is driven to compete in hosting parties, decorating houses and giving gifts? US! If Christmas is a holiday we choose to celebrate,
it is a celebration created and lived by each of us. I don’t control anyone’s Hanukah or Saturnalia celebration and I don’t celebrate those holidays.

And I am not bound by anyone else’s tradition for celebrating Christmas. I get to choose what I want to believe and how I want to celebrate. Working on this material, I began wondering what Charles Fillmore thought about the celebration of Christmas. I found an archive copy of his Christmas sermon from 1923. Pretty interesting.

He begins by going back to the origins and finding that “mas” was from the word “mass” and that in ancient times they didn’t celebrate births but deaths and a mass means dismissal or final words. The celebration in December was for the martyr Stephen. Later they added Saint John. They weren’t celebrating the birth of Jesus at all because all evidence points to his birth in the spring. Fillmore then turns to the additions to the holiday celebrations and notes that most of what is part of our celebrations now came from what he calls “the barbarians”. More accurately, the pagans. Kris Kringle was the god of the woods, celebrated by the Druids. Under the Roman rule of what we know as Germany, bringing trees into the house lured Kris Kringle into the house to leave gifts. The origin of presents he traces back to the winter solstice celebrations. He then notes, “Christianity, when it came into action desired, of course, to get as many people into church as possible, and they began to conciliate or bridge the difference between the old barbarian religion and Christian religion. The end was that they adopted nearly all their ceremonies and especially these things we are celebrating today as part of Christianity. They don’t belong in Christianity at all and I thank God for it. Especially this burden that has been saddled upon us of giving presents of late years.” Now remember, this is 1923.

Fillmore goes on to say, “There is that universal hustle and bustle and worry to give presents until many people have nervous prostration over it long before the time arrives. It has been materialized. There is no doubt of it and the Spirit has been lost sight of and we are going eventually to drop the giving of presents. I don’t think there is any doubt the tendency is in that direction. People are getting weary of the burden of buying presents. It is getting to be a commercial factor and merchants are egging us on with advertisements. Our friends are giving us presents and we are expected to give in return. And here we go. You might say it is a greed for giving.” I wonder what he would think today of his idea about the trend to stop giving presents? He has more on that later.
Next he has the idea that greetings and cards are a good idea because the original story in the Bible has angels bearing tidings, “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth and goodwill to men.” The real essence of Jesus’ message is the good news we can share throughout the whole year and Charles is pretty enthusiastic about this.

Then he has a revolutionary idea. He would promote a contest that would reward those who abstained from giving gifts at Christmas. He estimates there were 2 million people reading Unity literature then and growing annually. He would begin early in the year to promote his contest. I guess that didn’t materialize and if it did enter into 1924, it didn’t catch on.

In the sermon he then returns to what should be the real meaning of Christmas. He takes the message of the angels, “Glorify God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to men.” “If we would all take that as a text for the next year and live by it, we would raise the whole standard of thought in the world. If we could only get people to think about what it means. You have to get that down in your subconscious and express it. Glorify God and you will have peace and you must have good will. Now if we would apply that as our text for the next year, what wonderful results we would get. Let’s do it!” It is the doing of the thing Fillmore was adamant about. It is the understanding of the message, not the rote repeating of the message he was excited about.

So what is our message about keeping Christ in Christmas? How do we do that? Or as Fillmore says, how do we spiritualize our celebrations?

1. I think we have to let go of our expectations around this holiday. Begin by acknowledging that it is all made up. Every tradition and ritual came from some human imagination. And many came from fear that the sun god would abandon them or from manipulation of the forest gods. Then Christians just adapted to get people to come to church instead of dancing those pagan dances around a fire. Let it be foolish and a little less serious. Then every expectation you have of yourself, your family and your friends can be let go. Why tie yourself in knots with colored ribbon? Those expectations are made up also. The perfect party, the kiss under the mistletoe, the exact right gift, and the lights that are untangled and all lit--they exist in your imagination. How much simpler is it to enjoy how it all unfolds. Be at peace with whatever it is you choose to do and understand that it is your choice.
2. Give what you can give joyously. Somewhere in his sermon Fillmore says giving gifts is not a bad thing when we love the giving. It is the giving greed that has gotten us in trouble. Communicate your love! Tell your loved ones how much you love them and demonstrate it throughout the year. Give a letter sharing what you love about them. Give in your community in their honor. Take a stand for joyous giving. I sometimes liked the Secret Santa giving because no one knew who was giving. I enjoyed the challenge of learning about someone and discerning some little something they would like. Make what you give meaningful.

3. Return to number 1 and let go of expectations around giving. Ignore the advertising. Turn off the television. Excuse yourself from competition and be open about it. Let others know what the season means to you beyond the lights and parties and gifts. Receive gifts with grace and gratitude expressed without the pressure to return a gift. Trust that each year provides ample opportunities to give in so many ways so you can stay in the flow of giving and receiving without the pressure of a holiday gift.

4. Find the message of Christmas in your heart and build upon your understanding. Whether you choose Fillmore’s message from the angels, “Glorify God in the highest, peace on earth goodwill to men” or you choose something simpler, “Love is for everyone”; let this message guide you through the season and the coming year. Take time in the silence to commune with Spirit. Take time to be in community with others, giving of your being presence more than the wrapped presents. Let the Christmas message permeate your thoughts and actions on a daily basis. Enjoy the music and the parties and the lights as much as they support your Christmas message. Don’t separate them from the message or make any object the focus of the holiday. It is the experience of the message that is Christmas. It is our ability to live the message that is Christmas. The way to take Christ out of Christmas is for each of us to ignore the Christ of our own being. We are the light come into the world in this era, this time. We can radiate our light or allow it to become hidden in the dense materiality and fear of the worldly ways.

Christmas is your holiday to celebrate in the way that sustains your soul. Whether you spend it in solitude or in noisy gatherings of family and friends or some of each, Christ is in you.
It is up to you to discern how Christ shows up in your Christmas. It is up to you how you will share the message of Christmas. Last year we explored how the Grinch stole Christmas, only to discover he didn’t—couldn’t steal it at all from the hearts that held Christmas within. Once again, no one can take Christ out of your Christmas except you. Open your heart to the message of Christmas, Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth goodwill to all. Live that message and discover how we can celebrate Christmas every day.