

Welcome to Gaudete Sunday. You ask, "What's that?" It almost sounds Italian. Perhaps something you might serve with ravioli. Actually, it is the Latin word for Rejoice. So this is Rejoice Sunday. Many churches, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and some protestant churches too, use this day as a short break from the rigors of Advent. The theory is that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," as the old saying goes.

The catalyst is St. Paul's opening words in today's first lesson, "Rejoice always." So on this day, my sermon is VERY light. It is actually a true Christmas story. I don't know the author. But it has some really sage advice about the spirit of Christmas...and about Santa Claus. Here goes.

QUOTE:I remember my first Christmas adventure with Grandma. . I was just a kid. I remember tearing across town on my bike to visit her on the day my big sister dropped the bomb: "There is no Santa Claus," she jeered. "Even dummies know that!"

My Grandma was not the gushy kind, never had been. I fled to her that day because I knew she would be straight with me. I knew Grandma always told the truth, and I knew that the truth always went down a whole lot easier when swallowed with one of her world-famous cinnamon buns.

I knew they were world-famous, because Grandma said so. It had to be true. Grandma was home, and the buns were still warm. Between bites, I told her everything. She was ready for me. "No Santa Claus!" she snorted. "Ridiculous! Don't believe it. That rumor has been going around for years, and it makes me mad, plain mad. Now, put on your coat, and let's go."

"Go? Go where, Grandma?" I asked. I hadn't even finished my second world-famous, cinnamon bun. "Where" turned out to be Kerby's General Store, the one store in town that had a little bit of just about every-thing. As we walked through its doors, Grandma handed me ten dollars. **IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU REMEMBER THAT AMOUNT.** That was a bundle in those days.

"Take this money," she said, "and buy something for someone who needs it. I'll wait for you in the car." Then she turned and walked out of Kerby's.

I was only eight years old. I'd often gone shopping with my mother, but never had I shopped for anything all by myself. The store seemed big and crowded, full of people scrambling to finish their Christmas shopping. For a few moments I just stood there, confused, clutching that ten-dollar bill, wondering what to buy, and who on earth to buy it for. I thought of everybody I knew: my family, my friends, my neighbors, the

kids at school, the people who went to my church. I was just about thought out, when I suddenly thought of Bobby Decker. He was a kid with bad breath and messy hair, and he sat right behind me in Mrs. Pollock's grade-two class. Bobby Decker didn't have a coat. I knew that because he never went out for recess during the winter. His mother always wrote a note, telling the teacher that he had a cough, but all we kids knew that Bobby Decker didn't have a cough...he didn't have a coat.

I fingered the ten-dollar bill with growing excitement. I would buy Bobby Decker a coat! I settled on a red corduroy one that had a hood to it. It looked real warm, and he would like that.

"Is this a Christmas present for someone?" the lady behind the counter asked kindly, as I laid my ten dollars down.

"Yes," I replied shyly. "It's...for Bobby Decker." The nice lady smiled at me and she seemed as if she knew who Bobby Decker was.

I didn't get any change from the ten dollars, but she put the coat in a bag and wished me a Merry Christmas.

That evening, Grandma helped me wrap the coat in Christmas paper and ribbons. The price tag fell out of the coat, and Grandma tucked it in her Bible. On it she wrote, "To Bobby, From Santa Claus." Grandma said that Santa always insisted on secrecy.

Then she drove me over to Bobby Decker's house, explaining as we went that I was now and forever officially one of Santa's helpers. Grandma parked down the street from Bobby's house, and she and I crept noiselessly and hid in the bushes by his front walk. Then Grandma gave me a nudge. "All right, Santa Claus," she whispered, "get going." I took a deep breath, dashed for his front door, threw the present down on his step, pounded his doorbell and flew back to the safety of the bushes and Grandma.

Together we waited breathlessly in the darkness for the front door to open. Finally it did, and there stood Bobby.

Fifty years haven't dimmed the thrill of those moments spent shivering, beside my Grandma, in Bobby Decker's bushes. That night, I realized that those awful rumors about Santa Claus were just what Grandma said they were: ridiculous. Santa was alive and well, and we were on his team. I still have Grandma's Bible, with the price tag tucked inside: \$19 dollars and 95 cents. END QUOTE.

God gave the greatest gift of all time to the world on that first Christmas. We celebrate that gift of Jesus by giving gifts to others on Christmas.

Perhaps this story about the author and grandma and Bobby Decker helps us to focus on what gift giving should be.

And what about Santa Claus? There's a great message about him here too. His name was St. Nicholas. Legend has it that he began his life in what is now known as Turkey. That was way back in 280 a.d. Nicholas was very wealthy. And he was a very devout follower of our Savior, Jesus Christ and he was a bishop of the church. Like Jesus, he was truly committed to helping the sick and the poor. He gave away all his money to do that. And here's an interesting tidbit of information. When the "heroes" known as saints kind of disappeared from the scene during the period of history known as the Protestant Reformation, St. Nicholas (Santa Claus) did not.

Remember well the message of John 1...about who Jesus is and how he identifies us to God and God to us...and how through Jesus we have become the adopted children of God. And know how special you are because God became a person in Jesus...and how as a child of God, the Bobby Deckers of our world are OUR children and OUR brothers...to care about.