



## **“Christmas”**

By: Doug Warren

### **How can I best show respect for my neighbors of differing faiths during the holidays?**

In our pluralistic society it can be difficult even to know what to say sometimes. What do you say to people around this time of year? Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. Joyous Kwanzaa. Blessed Ramadan. If you celebrate one of these or other holidays, you most likely want to share some kind of greetings with others. But how do you avoid the potential to offend? Should religious holiday spirit be removed from the public view or be replaced with a bland Happy Holidays?

I think that a catchall holiday greeting misses the point. While it may be the easiest way to avoid offense, it does not help us in being truly good neighbors. One of the great things about having a season of celebration is the way that it facilitates us talking with one another. Most people tend to be more disposed to making the extra effort of looking another human being in the eyes and expressing good cheer during this time of year than any other.

### **Tolerance is a poor substitute for love**

The current trend to smooth over any differences of faith in these communications seems to me to be counter-productive rather than helpful. It tells nothing about the greeter's celebration. It asks nothing of the one being greeted. It is convenient at the cost of being impersonal. It is, in my opinion, an opportunity lost.

Real community is not built upon tolerance, but upon love. Loving someone is full of costs. It requires both vulnerability and sacrifice. We must be willing to let the other person know something about ourselves. The self-disclosure involved in letting someone know which holiday is the occasion for our celebration is certainly not baring our soul, but it is a step in the right direction. We must also be willing to listen to the reason for someone else's joy and not merely assume that it is the same as ours.

### **The best thing you can do is love your neighbor**

Everything that we can do to love another person contains the possibility of offense. There is simply no way around it. In fact the strong commitment not to offend tends most often to be motivated by fear. But love pushes out fear. What we need is not for everyone to be tolerant, but for everyone to be loving.

The problem is that we can manufacture tolerance, but we are incapable of generating authentic love. That is the reason that Jesus Christ needed to come in the first place. Now I realize, that this is the occasion for my celebration and may not be yours. Please hear me out and I promise I will be glad to hear you out too. (You can call me at any time at the number below.)

Jesus was born into a world so filled with hatred, intolerance, and cruelty, not to tolerate us, but to love us. Who wants to be tolerated instead of loved? It is because we cannot love, even as we

would like to love, that the God of love came to redeem us from our inability. Think about it. Is there anyone that you love as fully as you would like to? I love my wife, but I do not love her even according to my own internal standards. I love my children, but I fail to love them as I think a parent ought to. I love my neighbors, but they would be the first to tell you that I don't love them the way that they would like (sorry it took so long for me to rake our leaves).

### **Let's not miss the opportunity to be better neighbors this season**

My point is that by glossing over the reason for our celebrations, we miss out on the opportunity to share life together. Respecting someone else is not ignoring differences, but being willing to discuss them patiently and with genuine interest in who they are.

This season, as you celebrate (or don't celebrate) whatever holiday you choose, take some time to consider why. Take some time to evaluate if you are considering others and their reasons for joy or sorrow. Take the opportunity to get to know someone beyond pleasant greetings. Don't be afraid to share holiday greetings specific to your own tradition. But don't stop there. Rather than assume what someone else's tradition is or isn't, be willing to listen and care about them regardless of what differences they may have. Make the time to love someone as Christ has loved us. He is the reason I wish you and yours a very Merry Christmas!