

WHEN HOLIDAYS AREN'T HAPPY

I would like nothing better than for this holiday season to be happy and healthy for every family in this congregation (and everywhere else, for that matter)! The last thing I would want to do is to throw cold water on your enjoyment of this time of year. But I think it behooves us to recognize that the holiday season is difficult for some people. When you look at the ministry of Jesus, you see quite easily that He was constantly looking out for the underdog, the disadvantaged, the sick, the oppressed, the poor, the sorrowful. We ought always to imitate Him, but at this time of year we have extra opportunities to do so.

People who are struggling with illness, either their own or that of someone close to them, may not be able to enjoy the holidays like the rest of us. Especially in cases of a prolonged illness, both the person who is ill and the caregiver are undergoing a great deal of stress. Short visits can be helpful. Of course it's best to call first. Also, a longer visit can be appropriate so the caregiver can have a few hours away from home. Such a break from the routine might be particularly appreciated during the holiday season.

Holidays can be challenging for those who have recently had a death in the family, or when the anniversary of a loved one's death is in close proximity to the holiday. While we cherish the memories of past holidays, the fact that the loved one will not be with us this year brings some sadness. I have no solution for that problem; all I know to do is to be supportive and understanding while not passing judgment or cruelly telling the person to "get over it!" I learned decades ago not to tell another person how to grieve, or how long they are allowed to grieve!

A third roadblock to full enjoyment of the holidays for some is dysfunction within the family. Wouldn't it be great if all families were whole, everyone got along fine and treated each other with love, kindness, respect, and consideration? Well, dream on! Rare are the families that meet such an ideal. If you are in such a

family, blessed are you! Most of us have to deal with at least one or two cases of heartbreak. And some have virtually no family with whom they can share what ought to be a happy time of making good memories. Think of those whose parents or spouse or siblings or children, or any or all of these, have simply abandoned them. While others are laughing and eating and exchanging gifts, these people are at home by themselves, longing for the loving embrace of a child, or spouse, or parent, or sibling.

Let me make it clear: I am NOT trying to make you feel guilty for enjoying the holidays with your family! Please DO that! But I am asking that you remember those who would like to, but can't. A "random act of kindness" will let them know that they are loved. And again, be extremely slow to judge. "Well, if you had been a better spouse/parent/brother/sister/son/daughter, things wouldn't have turned out this way." When we say or even think such things, we're almost certainly meddling in things we know little or nothing about. People who are hurting don't need our condemnation. They have probably blamed and condemned themselves already, even if they are not really at fault. Jesus wasn't in the condemning business; He was in the loving and comforting and helping business. Let those things be our business as well.

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year!