

“What’s the Matter with Misfits?”

John 1:1-14

Series: The Promise of Christmas – I Will Make You My Child

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The highest-selling Christmas song of all time is not about Jesus. That prize goes to a misfit reindeer named Rudolph. Before the TV special, even before the song, there was an advertising executive named Robert May who worked for the Montgomery Ward department store chain. In 1939 they asked him to write a poem that Santa Claus could give away to children. By 1946, 6 million copies were handed out. In 1949, May’s brother-in-law Johnny Marks wrote the famous song. Amazingly, the song about a rejected reindeer was rejected by Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore. Finally, Gene Autry made it famous and sold 25 million copies.

Now why is Rudolph’s Christmas special so popular? After all, it’s a story about a reindeer whose nose is brighter than a jumbo jet’s landing lights and an elf who’s obsessed with performing root canals. When they meet they sing a song called, “We’re a couple of misfits. What’s the matter with misfits? That’s where we fit in.” Then it gets worse. They travel to the Island of Misfit toys. Every night, a winged lion named King Moonracer travels the world to find toys that no boy or girl loves. And what does he do with these sad, rejected, misfit toys? Give them to boys and girls who will love them? Offer them counseling? Take them to a tropical island? No – he banishes them to Siberia. Talk about punishing the victim. “Are you unloved? Okay, let’s freeze you to death.”

And what’s so wrong with these toys? Charlie in the box? He can legally change his name. The squirt gun that shoots jelly? Put water in next time. The little girl? I guess her crime was wearing calico. The cowboy who rides an ostrich? Well, I guess you Eagles fans think that sounds about right. When the misfit toys break into song they sing, “When Christmas day is here, the most wonderful day of the year.” But for them, Christmas is the worst day of the year because it marks another year they’ve been left behind on this frozen island. On Christmas Eve, when they think they’re forgotten once again, Charlie in the Box says, “Let’s go to bed and dream about next year.” To which the doll, with tears running down her cheeks, cries, “I don’t have any dreams left to dream.” I don’t think there is a sadder scene in all the Christmas specials. Yet in the end, as you well know, all the misfits – Rudolph, Hermie, the misfit toys, even the Bumble are embrace, accepted and loved.

I think Rudolph is so popular because we’re all misfits. In one way or another, at one time or another, perhaps even now, you’ve been rejected. Too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, too young, too old. Not smart enough, not strong enough, not handsome or pretty enough, not popular enough. No money. No friends. I don’t have love. I don’t fit in. Perhaps you feel you’ve been sent to your own personal Siberia, dropped in an emotional frozen wasteland.

Christmas Day is supposed to be the most wonderful day of the year. Yet for many it's not. It's supposed to be a day of love but it often magnifies strained and broken relationships. It's supposed to be a day of giving but it causes many to go deeper in debt. It's supposed to be a day of hope but many are afraid of what's coming in the New Year. It's supposed to be a day of joy but it reminds us of those who are no longer with us. It's supposed to be a day of faith, yet many doubt themselves and God.

On the other hand, Christmas is the one day of the year especially designed for misfits. On Christmas **God Became a Misfit**. The beginning of the Gospel of John says this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1:1-5, 9-11)

The Creator of the Universe squeezed into His creation. The Light of the world appeared in our darkness. The One who holds all things together came to be held by Mary. And yet the creation did not recognize its Creator. The people did not receive their Lord. The darkness tried to overcome the Light. At first Joseph didn't want the baby. The people of Nazareth probably shunned Mary. There was no room for His birth in Bethlehem. Herod ordered His execution. The family had to flee the country. And that was only the beginning. Later, Jesus would say,

“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”
(Luke 9:58)

Jesus said this at the start of His final journey to Jerusalem. We all know that journey ended with His crucifixion on a dark, lonely hill. It was our final message to God: “You don't belong here. You're a misfit.”

So why did God come as a misfit Child? He could have descended at the head of an angel army. He could have wiped out Herod and the Romans with an earthquake, wind and fire. Instead He came as a helpless, vulnerable baby that didn't fit in. Why?

God Came for All Misfits. All the people who witnessed the birth of Jesus were misfits. Mary and Joseph were under suspicion because of her pregnancy. The shepherds lived outdoors in the cold and on the fringe of society. The wise men were outsiders who did not worship the God of Israel.

A-List celebrities and royalty choose exclusive places for the birth of their children. Jay Z and Beyoncé chose Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan for the birth of Blue Ivy, their little bundle of joy. At \$2,500 a day Lenox Hill Hospital offers lavish suites with mahogany walls, hardwood floors, luxurious linens, a kitchenette, and even a concierge that can arrange anything from a stylish hairdo to manicure, pedicure, and massage. God was born in a borrow cave as a homeless Child in poverty. A feeding trough was His first cradle. He soon became a refugee. He did this to show He came for the least, the lost and the lonely. He came down to our level and lived like us.

This Christmas I was excited to pick out and decorate our Christmas tree with our grandsons. I imagined a beautiful, old fashioned, family memory of cutting down the tree, bringing it in from the forest, decorating it with the little ones, drinking hot chocolate and eating Christmas cookies. As it turned out, we drove for miles to find a field covered in prickly bushes and no trees save for one spindly, sparse, sharp needled giant that looked like Charlie Brown's tree on steroids. Once it was up I suddenly remembered why it took so long to hang the ornaments with children. Ben clustered all the ornaments in one spot. Isaac crawled under the tree and played with the water. By the end they were standing on top of me. I just surrendered.

Part of the joy of Christmas is seeing the whole thing from a child's eye level. When my daughter-in-law Jackie talked with Ben about why we celebrate Christmas, Ben commented that since Jesus lives in both Heaven and his heart, he probably spends time playing on Jupiter when he's traveling back and forth. We'll never understand all the mysteries and wonders of God. Yet what is truly wonderful is that He came to understand us, to live with us, to be a misfit like us.

Yet Jesus did more than just live with us. **God Came So We'd No Longer Be Misfits.** Jesus came with one mission: to reconcile us to God. Paul would later say,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, 21)

The things which most separate us from one another and from God are our sins. Prejudice, selfishness, hate, desire, fear – these are the forces that cause us to feel like misfits and view others as misfits. Our sins caused us to not fit into the Garden of Eden in the beginning. Jesus came to take away that barrier of our sin by taking it upon Himself. His birth, death and resurrection means we are no longer misfits. Our Father loves us and wants us to come home.

Paco Amodar, a pastor in Little Village on Chicago's west side, lives in a neighborhood rife with gang violence. When a young neighborhood boy was gunned down by rival gang violence he was invited to lead a prayer vigil.

When I arrived at the vigil, a large crowd of young people—including many known gang members—were already gathered around the sidewalk. I wondered, “What should I do? What should I say? I felt fearful and inadequate. As I looked out over the crowd, I realized most of these scary-looking gang members were just kids, mostly in their mid or late teens or twenties. I was old enough to be their father. As I looked at these hurting teenagers, I wondered what would Jesus say to these young people?

Then I said, “I am the age of your fathers. Would you allow me to address you on behalf of your fathers? I know you have heard plenty of times that this back and forth violence in our neighborhood is complete nonsense. You've been told how destructive gang behavior is. But today, on behalf of your dads, I want to say to you what should have been said a long time ago. My son, my daughter, would you forgive me for not being

there for you when you were little? Will you forgive me for not being there when you took your first steps? Will you forgive me for not being there to play catch with you when you were young? Will you forgive me for leaving you when you most needed me?"

As the words poured from my lips, I could not control myself. Tears ran freely down my cheeks. To my surprise, many of them started to weep with me. Something special happened in that moment. Following the gathering they started to trust me even though I had no credibility in their world. I hadn't shared their life, but I had shared their pain.¹

God our Father sent His Son to wipe away sin, to heal the pain caused by others, to prove to us that we fit in His family. In fact, the message of Christmas is God became a misfit so we could become His children. John says,

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:12-13).

What does that mean? If you receive this Child in faith then you are God's child and nobody can change that. No matter where you've been, what you've done or who you are, you are no longer a misfit. You fit into God's family. The greatest Christmas gift you'll ever receive is to receive Jesus and His promise to make you God's child.

We want everyone to know that promise. That's why we are working with Urban Promise in Trenton. Many young people across the river are tempted to join gangs or victims of gangs. Urban Promise gives them a way out. Its mission is to give Trenton's children and youth the skills they need for academic achievement, life management, spiritual growth, and Christian leadership. When they join Urban Promise they no longer feel like misfits. They discover they are children of God. Jaden Picott joined Urban Promise when he was 9. Today he has matured to be a Street Leader who mentors others. Jaden and his younger sister Jaya live in a community where death knocks down young people like dominos. Their mom Shawnita says,

That's exactly why programs like Urban Promise Trenton are necessary in our community; our children need a safe place to go after school where they'd be regularly engaged in positive activities with people they know care about them.

Urban Promise offers her children a place where they fit in, where they are loved and prepared for a future. Through our Promise of Christmas offering you can make an incredible difference in their lives and the lives of many others who feel they are misfits in a world that does not care if they live or die. They are receiving Jesus who makes them a child of God. This Christmas, let homeless families in Bucks County, children and teens in Trenton and villagers in Mozambique know they are not misfits. A little white envelope can change their lives and help them fit into God's family.

Every Christmas, Mike Garvin felt like a misfit. His wife Nancy writes,

¹ Paco Amador, "Weeping on Heaven's Door," Leadership Journal (November 2013)

Mike hated Christmas—oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it: overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute, the gifts given in desperation. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties.... I reached for something special just for Mike.

Our son Kevin was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear. They could not afford it. We ended up walloping them.

Mike shook his head sadly. "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." That's when the idea for his present came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed an envelope on the tree. It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. The note inside told Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas. Each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year giving a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there. We lost Mike due to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was so wrapped up in grief that I barely got the tree up. But on Christmas Eve I placed an envelope on the tree, and in the morning it was joined by three more. Each of our children placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelopes.²

Like a small white envelope, God came as a tiny baby to change our world. God became a misfit so we could become His children. That's where we fit in.

² Nancy Garvin, "For The Man who Hated Christmas," Woman's Day magazine December 14, 1982