Sunday, December 14, 1986
A SAINT FOR ALL OF US: NICHOLAS
Isaiah 11:1-3; Matthew 11:2-6

Some saints are more popular than others. Most likely, a saint's popularity has something to do with what the saint symbolizes or what holiday the saint is connected with.

Such is the case of St. Nicholas. At one time, this saint stood third, behind Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in frequency and intensity of worship. This was particularly true in Russia. Hundreds of churches were dedicated to him. Nicholas became a popular name for boys and in such adaptations as Nicole for girls.

When the Protestant Reformation swept parts of Europe, efforts were made to eliminate the Nicholas cult. But something stronger than theological argument resisted these pressures: a deep human need to retain the image of the most human and yet most mysterious of all the saints.

There are more legends about Nicholas than any other saint. Most of them are stories of his miraculous deeds on behalf of individuals who were suffering. According to one legend, for example, the saint was traveling on a ship to the Holy Land when he dreamed that a fierce storm would endanger the boat. He warned the crew of the coming danger but assured them that it would pass. When a storm actually broke out, one of the sailors fell to his death from a mast. But once the high wind subsided, St. Nicholas restored him to life. Perhaps because of this legend, St. Nicholas has been an awe-inspiring patron of all seafaring people.

This morning, we are going to look more closely at St. Nicholas, the man, and the legends. More than anything else, we want to see how his life can help inspire our living as followers of Christ.

Nicholas was born in Patara, possibly in the year 280, or some scholars say 290. Today, the town of Patara is located in Turkey, not far from Myra (now Demre), where Nicholas later gained fame as a bishop. Both small towns are near the coast of the eastern Mediterranean.

The boy's parents were well-to-do, apparently from an inheritance. They were naturally pious people. It is believed that his parents were childless for many years and that he was born when they were older than most. Thus, from infancy, the long-prayed-for Nicholas was dedicated to God. The record of his birth compares Nicholas with a biblical figure, Samuel, whose parents were also older than usual when he was born and was dedicated by his parents to God at a very early age.

Little Nicholas is credited with precocious religiosity, even in babyhood. According to the legends, he did not demand his mother's breast on fast days — Wednesday and Friday — except after sunset. He not only showed his piety by observing the fast days, but he was also a sturdy child who managed to stand up prematurely in his washbasin and crib.

Young Nicholas showed from the beginning that he wanted to please God. He was a good student, attended church services regularly, where he assisted the adults so that he might benefit from their example and guidance.

There are so many stories and legends that have grown up around St. Nicholas that it is impossible to tell them all. Legends come into existence around saintly people because they do so much of their good work in secret, and good legends do not grow up around bad people. I wonder what legends, if any, will grow up around each one of us.

In years past, everyone knew St. Nicholas. He was every lost person's friend and every orphan's father. Boys and girls, destitute maidens, travelers, merchants, and seamen all claimed him as their particular friend. All self-respecting towns and seaports took care to place him among their patron saints and honored him accordingly. He was invoked to settle all descriptions of problems, from infant welfare to shipwreck, from marriage to insurance. No bargain of buying or selling could be settled without consulting him.

There are few towns and cities in Europe that can be found without a church or at least a shrine dedicated to him. In England, nearly 500 churches are dedicated to him, and he stands seventh in order of popularity, higher than St. Paul and many of the apostles.

Nicholas was ordained into the priesthood when he was nineteen years old. His uncle, the bishop, prophesied that his nephew would offer guidance and consolation to many and would one day also be a bishop and live a life of enlightenment.

Here are some other stories about Nicholas and his good deeds:

After Nicholas had grown to young manhood, he decided to devote his life entirely to the service of God, doing good works for people everywhere. Obeying the words of Christ, he distributed all of his possessions to the poor, the sick, and the suffering. He is said to have secretly helped very poor people by putting gifts of money through their windows during the night when no one could see him.

Because of this, children throughout Europe have for years put notes in the windows of their homes addressed to the dear little Christ Child, believing that St. Nicholas would take these notes and see to it that they were properly delivered.

Nicholas also used his money to rescue others from bondage. Here is where the story of the three bags of gold had its beginning and thereafter became his emblem. Some legends hold that this incident took place before he became a priest and others say it was after — but it makes no difference, the story itself is the same.

A widowed nobleman lived in the same town as Nicholas. Once well-to-do, but now penniless and desperate, the man found himself unable to take care of his three teenage daughters. Nicholas heard that the distraught father had decided to "sell off" his oldest daughter, presumably into slavery or prostitution. To forestall this, but not give himself away, Nicholas tied three hundred florins into a handkerchief. After dark, he got near the house of the distraught father and threw the money through an open window. This act has been dramatized in many paintings, particularly in 12th-century Italy, as well as in sculptures, woodcuts, and stained-glass windows.

With the first daughter saved, the household managed to survive for a time. But not long after, the father was in financial straits once more. Before anything untoward could happen, however, Nicholas did the good deed all over again. Naturally, the father was pleased and puzzled. When the third daughter was in danger and the money once more came flying through the window, her father caught Nicholas in the act, thanked and praised him, and the

secret was a secret no longer. In all three cases, the father had been able to use the money as a dowry so all three young women would be married.

Do you remember ever seeing three golden balls hanging above the door of a pawnbroker's shop? Did you ever wonder how they became the sign of this particular trade? Pawnbrokers and bankers in northern Italy used to look to St. Nicholas as their patron saint. The sign above their shops symbolized the three bags of gold Nicholas used to assure the freedom of the three young women in his hometown.

Here's another legend. During the time Nicholas was a bishop, there was a great famine in the land. One day, a poor widow sent her three little boys out for something to eat, lest they all die of hunger. The children ran to the baker's and pleaded with him for a piece of bread, but he had none. They went to the marketplace, but it was empty, and some hungry rats scared the children. In their fear, they knocked at the door of a tavern and asked to be let in. "I have nothing to eat," said the innkeeper, who still looked well-fed somehow. "But come in anyway, it's getting dark, you can sleep here." The poor widow waited in vain for her little ones. When a week had passed and the children could not be found, she went to the church in despair to tell God of her sorrow. Later that day, a man wrapped in a dark cloak entered the tavern. As the innkeeper came forward to greet the guest, he shrugged and pleaded the famine as an excuse for not being able to give him more than a bed. But the guest shook his head. "Give me some of the pickled meat in your jars," he said.

The innkeeper turned pale. He tried to escape, but the man grabbed him and led him to the hidden cupboard where three large jars of pickled meat stood in a row. Trembling all over, the innkeeper fell on his knees. The stranger dropped his cloak; he was St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. He made the sign of the cross and spoke in a clear ringing voice, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, said the Son of God." He raised his fingers and touched the jars, and the boys came out of them alive and well.

In different parts of the world, Nicholas is remembered in different ways. The town of Bari in southern Italy celebrates the saint's arrival in its port each May 9, and it virtually ignores other dates connected with St. Nicholas, including any relation to Christmas, gift-giving, and children. The children of Bari, like boys and girls throughout Italy, hang up their stockings for gifts on January 6, the eve of Epiphany. The tradition is that children expect gifts from a benign witch, known as Befana. The witch's original identity is lost in folk traditions that predate Christianity. Her role is something like today's American Santa Claus — she knows whether a child has been naughty or nice. Her involvement with children is said to date back to the birth of Christ when she missed seeing the three wise men and was condemned to search for them forever. But, no matter what her origin, Italian parents have used the Befana's name to frighten their children, just as some parents today use Santa Claus.

In most other parts of Europe, Christians came to believe that on December 6, St. Nicholas revisited the earth — and it originally had nothing to do with Christmas. On the Christian calendar, December 6 was St. Nicholas Day. The calendar carried special days for all of the major saints.

For a while after the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe, the feast of St. Nicholas faded or at least went underground, but days of joy and festivity, no matter what their origin, cannot be kept down. When the Dutch came to this country, for example, and established the colony of New Amsterdam, which is now New York City, their children kept the tradition of the visit of St. Nicholas on the eve of December 6, December 5.

There is still a lot of debate among historians as to how and when St. Nicholas evolved or is connected to Santa Claus with his reindeer and the North Pole and all the other traditions that go with it. That's a topic for another sermon.

The important thing for us today is that the life and legend of St. Nicholas remind us that the God we worship, and who is frequently best represented by saintly persons like Nicholas, is a God who has special concern for those in need, in trouble, and who hurt in any way. As Nicholas sought out people who needed help, so does God, and so are we to do the same. In God's name, almost all of the legends about St. Nicholas are those which tell us of his being of help to people with unique and difficult problems. And there is no hint that Nicholas only helped or brought gifts to children or adults who had been good during the past year. God's love is unconditional. There are no conditions to God's gifts.

Also, the lives of the saints like Nicholas speak to us of the joy and fun of being a Christian. The religion of Jesus is a life-affirming faith. It is a religion filled with a love that shakes the poison out of all of our lives and leads to the abundant life — and by abundant, it does not mean having an overflowing abundance of material things. It means having a life with joy and love.

The saints are the people who go singing through the world, even in the darkest times, cheered by an abiding vision of the unseen which tells them there's much more to life than we ordinarily see.

The life of St. Nicholas says to us — look around you. There are saints at work in the world even now, and most of them are working secretly. The true saints usually work in secret. And when you do good works in secret — you too are a saint like Nicholas. Amen.