

FA LA LA LA LA

Dec. 5, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Alright; we're going to start with some one-liners. Here we go. **[Congregation laughs]**

Did you hear about the butcher who backed into the meat grinder? He got a little behind in his work. **[Imitates "rim shot" drum roll] [Congregation laughs]** Okay!

My friend has designed an invisible airplane. I can't see it taking off! **[Congregation laughs]**

I swallowed a dictionary and it gave me "the-saur-us" throat I ever had! **[Congregation laughs and moans]**

I saw a guy standing on one leg at an ATM. Must have been checking his balance! **[Imitates "rim shot" drum roll] [Congregation laughs]**

I asked a woman out on a date at the buffet. She said she had a lot on her plat. **[Laughs with congregation]**

Here's the last one, mercifully! I have this fear of speed bumps, but I'm slowly getting over it. **[Imitates "rim shot" drum roll] [Congregation laughs and applauds]** Okay! Alright!

So jokes are designed to make us smile and feel good. And I would say that the Christmas season is there for us to smile and feel good.

How many people would say that you love Christmas? That you think it's the most wonderful time of the year? On a scale of 1 to 10, you think it's 10 or 12! Christmas-loving people: hands in the air! Okay.

How many people would say that you like Christmas, and you think it's good, but you're not that gung ho. You think it's a little over-commercialized. And you like it but, you know ... it's not the thing. Anybody? Like a seven or eight Christmas? Okay.

And then how many people either know someone or have had traumatic events at Christmas, and it's a tough time? And it's challenging: can feel lonely? Or may not able to afford gifts and feel some of that stress? How many people would say, on the Christmas meter, they may be ringing up a four or a five? Anybody ever had even one Christmas like that?

You know, if I'm honest with you, I'm like a seven or eight. **[Congregation murmurs]** You know, I like Christmas, but ... One of the things that was tough for me was, like, being born in Trinidad in the Caribbean. Buying Santa -- this big man with a white beard coming down the chimney when you don't even have a chimney in the entire country -- was really a hard sell. **[Congregation laughs]**

Being one of 10 children, the whole gift thing ... you know, was really not a big deal. I was kind of like Cindy Lou Who. Remember in *The Grinch* when she said, "Doesn't this all seem superfluous?" That was the kid that I was. Now, I loved being with my family: love hanging out with them. Love the foods. Love the visiting. I loved all that about Christmas! The Christmas lights and decorations. I so did not like Christmas gifts. I campaigned, when I was a teenager, for us to not have gifts: just give blood, not gifts, and just eat and enjoy food. I even volunteered on Christmas Day at a local prison in Hamilton when I was a kid.

Something else: I didn't resonate with a lot -- or not a huge fan -- is Christmas carols and Christmas music. I like it; it's not like I hate it. But there are a couple that I just don't resonate with. Naturally, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." And the other one, interestingly, is "Deck the Halls." For some reason, "Deck the Halls" -- Fa la la la -- you may as well have said, "Blah blah, blah, blah, blah!" **[Congregation laughs]** I was just ... It's peppy; it's nice. But, for some reason, I didn't connect.

Now, I do love Christmas carols. I tend to like stuff like "Silent Night," "O Holy Night," "O Little Town of Bethlehem." I like the Nat King Cole album, the Kenny G and, of course, "The Charlie Brown Christmas." That's my favorite.

But let's just talk about my feelings around "Deck the Halls." I don't know why I don't like it! You know, there was a movie of "Deck the Halls." I think Matthew Broderick and Danny De Vito. I so disliked the hymn -- the carol, "Deck the Halls" -- I won't even watch the movie! I have this issue and energy and block around "Deck the Halls."

You know, I know it kind of sounds kind of "Bah-Humbug-ish," and you're probably thinking, "Yes, Rev. Scrooge; it does sound like that!" **[Congregation laughs]**

But I like to share: a couple of years ago, I had an epiphany. I had a spiritual experience: spiritual awakening. And the choir was singing about three years ago, four years ago. And they were singing "Deck the Halls." And, but this time -- for the first time -- when I was singing, "Fa la la la la, la la la la," I couldn't stop smiling! "Fa la la la la, la la la la!"

Let's say it together: **[with congregation]** "Fa la la la la, la la la la!"

It was like my tongue was having a party in my mouth! **[Congregation laughs]** It was fantastic! "Fa la la la la, la la la la!" I mean, I've got to tell you: something happened. Something changed deep inside of me. You know, I was moved deeply, and transformed. And I would say to you that I think my heart grew three sizes that day. **[Congregation laughs]** I smiled and just sang, "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

And, seriously, the energy I get from those worlds -- "Fa la la la la, la la la la" -- it's this feeling and an affirmation of positivity. A mind-opening, heart-opening awareness of how blessed I am and how good life is. How much abundance there is.

Saying, "Fa la la la la, la la la la" just isn't a Christmas thing; it is an "any time" thing to remind us how much abundance -- how many blessings -- are in our lives. And even when things aren't going well, that there's still good and reason to say, "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

We're going to do a little call-and-response. Whatever I say, your response is, "Fa la la la la, la la la la." **[Congregation laughs]** Okay? Here we go! Let's play along.

If you have a bad hair day - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you get a flat tire - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

Even though you don't think my jokes are funny - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you get an unexpected bonus at work - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you have a close, loving family you spend the holidays with - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you have to work on Christmas day - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you bought someone an expensive gift, and they bought you a cheap gift or no gift - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

If you get all the gifts on your Christmas wish list - **[congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

So that was three or four years ago; I was transformed! And the funny thing is: recently, "Fa la la la la" has been popping in my head again! So I asked myself the question: "Does 'Fa la la la la' actually mean something? Or is it just like a filler thing, like 'Nah, nah, nah, nah' and 'Dah dah dah dah dah duh' and 'Doo-wop'? Is that all it is? Or does it have more meaning and depth, and even a spiritual message to it?"

So I looked it up. "Deck the Halls" was a Welsh song, and it dates back to the 16th century. And it had nothing to do with Christmas. It actually was connected to New Year's Eve.

And, for me, just reading about it made me realize "Fa la la la la" is this affirmation of celebration and appreciation of how abundantly blessed we are. Interestingly, Fa La La is actually a name: it is a female

name whose origin is from Ghana. And if you translate it, it actually means, in English, "thanks to God for his bounty."

So "Fa la la la la, la la la la" is like saying, "Thank you, God, for the abundance in my life."

This morning I want to look at three ways that we could use the mindset of the "Fa la la la la-ness" to help us really appreciate how abundantly blessed we are ... not just at Christmas-time, but any time.

And the first one is to thank God for the **THE ABUNDANCE OF HOPE**. How many people have a situation or a relationship in your life that you hope improves and gets better? You know, have you ever had a time where you felt little hope? No hope? Or even absolutely hopeless about something getting better or changing in your life?

I want you to think for a second about hope. What is your relationship with hope? What do you believe about hope? How do you use hope in your life?

You know, hope doesn't sound very powerful. It doesn't sound very significant or important. But the truth is: hope is a vital component of being alive. Without hope, you wouldn't dream. Without hope, you wouldn't try. Without hope, you wouldn't get out of bed. Without hope, guess what? You'd have no faith! If you had no hope, you wouldn't believe.

Martin Luther King said that losing hope somehow is like losing "the vitality that keeps life moving." Could you imagine your life with no hope?

Dr. Dale Archer said this. He said, "If I could find a way to package and dispense hope, I would have a pill more powerful than any anti-depressant on the market. Hope is the difference between a psychological victim and a psychological survivor. As long as a patient, individual or victim has hope, they can recover from anything and everything." Hope is a vital part of living.

You know, Christmas is a story about hope. The children of Israel were oppressed and they were struggling. They were suffering under the rule of the Roman Empire. They were feeling powerless, hopeless, even helpless. They weren't experiencing freedom. They weren't experiencing joy or prosperity. And it was their yearning desire to have someone help: to have a Savior. Because they were hoping for a better life.

You know, the birth of the Christ Child is really a prophecy: a great prophecy to give hope to all people. In Colossians it says, "Christ in you: the hope of glory." In the Book of Romans it says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Christmas is a reminder of the hope that is always there for us. See, hope is a belief that life can get better. Hope is a belief that there's solutions and answers; even if I can't see it now, there is a hope that things will change. Things will improve. Things will get better. There is always hope there, because God is always there. There's a light of hope shining for each and every one of us. Christ in you is your hope of glory.

So my question for you is: Where in your life could you use a little more hope? And are you willing to tune in and open yourself and your mind to the hope of God that is always within you?

Christ in me is my hope of glory! Together: **[with congregation]** "Christ in me is my hope of glory."

Fa la la la la, la la la la! **[Congregation laughs]** Come on! **[With congregation]:** "Fa la la la la, la la la la."

Thank you, God, for the abundance of hope. Together: **[with congregation]** "Thank you, God, for the abundance of hope."

[Someone in congregation: "Fa la la la la, la la la la."] **[Rev. Maraj laughs]**

You know, somebody once said **[laughs]** ... somebody once said, "If God brings you to it, God'll get you through it." And, to me, that is the foundation of hope.

So the next "Fa la la" lesson is to thank God for the **ABUNDANCE OF LOVE**. You know, when you look at the iconic Christmas stories of transforming a life, it is really about transforming and awakening to love. If you look the Grinch and Scrooge, their miracle was: their hearts opened. They had their hearts closed for a long time.

Scrooge: his sister died, who ... I think Fanny, who was his favorite person in the world, who loved him the most. And I think he had a fiancée and he chose money and ambition over love. And he just closed his heart off. You know, he was stingy. He was unkind. He was selfish and self-absorbed.

And the Grinch -- I'm going to take the Jim Carrey version -- you know, felt rejected. He felt humiliated. He felt ostracized, and he closed his heart off and began to hate.

And the greatest miracle and transformation -- Christmas miracle and any other -- usually is about opening your heart to love. It's about looking at those areas in your life where you've closed your heart to someone. Maybe closed your heart even to yourself. And it's about: are you willing to re-awaken and open?

See, there's never a lack of love. There's never no love. There's an abundance of love! The question is: Is our heart open to it? Where is your life calling you to open your heart to love? Open your heart to receive love? Open your heart to give love?

You know, even George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* ... Even though he had a family that loved him, you know what his cutting edge of opening his heart to love was? Was he thought, when he messed up: he wished he had never been born. Could you imagine feeling like that? Knowing that you made a mistake, and feeling that people wouldn't love you to the point that you wished you'd never been born?

And, finally, at the end he realized that he absolutely deserved people's help. Even though he thought he messed up ... I mean ... yeah, he thought he messed up; he actually didn't. But it was a big lesson of: Do you feel worthy of love? Because that's a huge part of it! We think it's always about giving love, giving love. But how well do you receive love? How open are you to feel absolutely worthy of being loved, being cared for, being cherished?

A woman in a class I was teaching -- and we were talking about love -- she came up to me and said, "*I just got it! I just got it! I've had no special romantic relationship in my life for years, and I've always kept saying things like, 'I have no love in my life. I have no love life. I don't have enough love. Nobody loves me.'*" And she said, "*I finally got it! You know, I kept one area of my life, I didn't have enough love, and I kept nullifying and discounting all the other love ... not even acknowledging all the other love as valuable.*"

Because she didn't have it in her romantic area, she almost discounted it in her family. With her friends. At work. All the different places that she experienced love. And then she finally got it: that she already lived in an abundance of love.

You know, sometimes we do that to ourselves. If it's not in our family, you know, we think we don't have enough love. But sometimes we have lots of love with our friends. Lots with our children. Lots with our grandparents. There are all kinds of ways we get to love. And we need to not close it off because we think one area.

You know, I mean, yesterday was Carol Wood's memorial, as I mentioned. And one of the things: it was such a celebration. And people just acknowledged how much they loved her, and how much she loved them. From cousins and friends and strangers, employees. Over and over again, all this love. Talked about how she loved her parents; she loved her family. Loved this; loved that; loved that!

And the most amazing thing is: she didn't find her romantic -- the best romantic -- love until she was 65! She did not let the fact that that had not really clicked in her life stop her from keep loving all the people she was loving. And that message: even if something isn't clicking in the love area of your life, keep

loving all the other people. Keep loving in all the other ways. Love in big ways; love in small ways. Love all ways! That is the answer!

And so, when you're not feeling as loved, here are the things you do. Number one: look at the places where you are loving folks, and where they're loving you ... and just celebrate and appreciate that. Secondly, keep loving. Just keep, keep, keep loving in all those areas: brothers, friends, sisters, cousins, anybody. Just keep loving. And the third one is: ask yourself, "Where is life calling me to open my heart to love more? Who needs more of my love? And where can I open my heart to receive more love, and allow more love?"

I am abundantly loved, and I am abundantly loving. Together: **[with congregation]** *"I am abundantly loved, and I am abundantly loving."*

Fa la la la la, la la la la! **[Congregation laughs]** Let me hear you say it! **[With congregation]:** *"Fa la la la la, la la la la."*

Thank you, God, for the abundance of love. Together: **[with congregation]** *"Thank you, God, for the abundance of love."*

And the third one **[laughs]** is for the ... It seemed like a good idea last night. Really. **[Congregation laughs]** After this, no one's probably ever going to say the phrase, "Fa la la la la, la la la la" again. But it still makes me smile!

Anyway, the last one's about THE ABUNDANCE OF JOY. You know, Jesus said he came that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete. You know, the thing about joy: it appears three times as much as the word "happiness," because there's a greater depth of joy. Happiness sometimes is a fleeting thing based on things that happen in our lives. But joy is this inner feeling. It is inner connection that is not related or connected to any outer thing that has to happen (or not happen). It is just about knowing that the kingdom of God is within you. That that light and peace of God is within you. That hope of joy -- that wisdom and kindness of God -- is all in you.

In Psalm 16 it says, *"In thine presence is the fullness of joy."* Joy comes from knowing that God is your source: that the source of joy -- the source that makes everything possible -- is in you! And, by feeling it and knowing it and experiencing it, it doesn't mean that everything's going to be perfect in your life. But it means that you are grounded in a way that you know where that source is. That you know that it is within you, and that it will absolutely help you through.

"Joy to the World" - I love the words. It says, *"Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king."* And here's my favorite line: *"Let every heart prepare him room. And heaven and nature sing."*

And so, in this busy, hustle/bustle time, how much are you preparing room for that deeper connection to that Christ Child in you? How much time are you spending being still? And quieting your mind? And opening your heart to feel that Living Spirit of God? To commune and connect, to align yourself with that Spirit?

See, if we don't find joy in here **[points to heart]**, we'll be chasing ... There ain't enough gifts or anything that could make us feel a lasting joy.

Emmett Fox, the great spiritual writer, said this. He said, *"The one thing that matters in our lives, from our birth to our death, is for us to find the Christ Child. The inner light that is spoken of in the Bible as a child is the light of God. The conscious discovery by you that you have the power within you -- and your determination to make use of it: that is the birth of the Christ Child."*

One of my favorite parables is the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. And it says this: *"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When someone found it, and hid it, and then -- in his joy -- he goes and sells all that has and buys the field."* And so what he's saying is that, when you realize the treasure is in you -- when you realize that the thing that makes life fulfilling, and the thing that is the pathway to all that we could experience and desire is already in you -- then you will sell everything.

Which means get rid of the things that are distracting you and stopping you and possessing you from going deeper into yourself, and buy it. Own it. Claim it. Care for it. Nurture it. That that is the essence of true joy: is to know that Spirit -- that Christ Child -- within you. That light of God in you.

God is my source of joy; am filled with joy. Together: [with congregation] "God is my source of joy; I am filled with joy."

Fa la la la la, la la la la! **[Laughs]**

Thank you, God, for the abundance of joy! Together: **[with congregation]** "*Thank you, God, for the abundance of joy.*"

You know, Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. But the true richness of Christmas is something that can't be seen! It is only something that can be experienced within ourselves. It's not about the gifts. It's not about all that outer stuff. But when you find the joy in you, guess what? The outer stuff is more joyful, because you're not depending on it to make you happy. You just actually get to enjoy and experience it from a deeper level of joy and fulfillment.

You know, the secret of Christmas and a happy life is in the chorus of "Deck the Halls." It is the affirming and celebrating and appreciating of all the good and blessings in your life. It is the thing that says, "*Thank you, God, for the abundance of hope. Thank you, God, for the abundance of love. Thank you, God, for the abundance of joy.*"

So if you feel a little down at Christmas or any other time, I invite you -- regardless of what's happening - - to affirm and to say these beautiful words to yourself, and say them frequently. And they are: **[with congregation]** "*Fa la la la la, la la la la!*"

God bless you all! **[Congregation applauds]**

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