

A Gift for Teacher

A CHRISTMAS STORY

T was the night before Christmas and the kids were all in bed. Mom, a teacher at the local elementary school, went downstairs to finish wrapping gifts under the big pine tree the family got from Mr. Cheever's Christmas tree lot. Just as she finished putting the last red bow on the last red box, she heard the scrape, scrape, scraping of something in the chimney. No sooner had she turned around when down the chimney came Santa with a bound.



“Oh,” he said with surprise. “I’m usually pretty good at not being seen.” Then he laughed a big, round laugh and put down his bag.

“Let’s see,” he muttered to himself as he pulled out a list of what to place under the tree. “Oh, yes.” He cleared his throat. “You’ve all been very good this year. Especially you...even with Tommy Wigglebottom in your class. You’ve been a wonderful teacher!”

“Thank you,” she said as he pulled brightly colored presents from his bag.

Quick as a flash, he was done with his deed. He looked at his list for one last read. Then he made a “har-umph” sound to himself and got a puzzled look on his face. “There is one more thing...”

“Yes?” said the teacher.

“Why haven’t I heard any singing at school?” Santa asked with a sorrowful look.

“Singing? Why, we’ve been singing. Haven’t you heard the children’s rendition of Frosty The Snowman and Jingle Bells? I know it’s a long way to the North Pole but I would think you have some way of tuning this sort of thing in.”

“I mean Christmas carols,” said Santa. “Where are the carols?”

“Oh, I loved to sing carols when I was a child in school. But, we can’t sing those now,” she said as she shook her head. “I teach in a public school.” She was surprised that Santa didn’t already know this since he knew about Tommy Wigglebottom.

“Of course you are in the public schools. But Christmas is Christmas no matter where you are. And if you’re concerned about the law, well, have no fear. Don’t you know about the Federal Appeals Court ruling in *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*? It ruled that students may sing religious Christmas carols all they want!”

The teacher had never heard this before and was quite surprised. “What about the separation of church and state?”

“It doesn’t apply,” said Santa. “The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that singing Christmas carols does not violate the Constitution if the purpose is the ‘advancement of the student’s knowledge of society’s cultural and religious heritage.’ I just wish I could hear them singing real Christmas songs.

“And while I’m thinking



about it, why haven't you told the children the real Christmas story?" he asked.

"You mean about the baby Jesus?" the teacher asked in disbelief.



"Is there another Christmas story that I'm not aware of?" Santa said with an impatient twitch of his mustache.

"But, we can't promote religion in the public school," she retorted.

"Who's promoting?" said Santa. "You're teaching about your culture. May I remind you of the *Florey* case in which the Court ruled that as long as education about the religious holiday is 'presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage,' it is permitted."

By now the teacher was quite confused. She had never heard this before. She always assumed that recognizing the religious aspects of Christmas at school was off limits.

"We can't even call Christmas by its name. We have to call it 'Winter Break,'" she said with regret in her voice.

"A tragedy of modern times," Santa said with a sigh. "And it's not even consistent with other public practices. The Supreme Court acknowledged in *Lynch v. Donnelly* that 'Executive Orders and other official announcements of Presidents and of the Congress have proclaimed both Christmas and Thanksgiving National Holidays in religious terms. And, by Acts of Congress, it has long been the practice that federal employees are released from duties on these National Holidays, while being paid from the same public revenues that provide the compensation of the Chaplain of the Senate and the House and military services. Thus, it is clear that Government has long recognized—indeed it has subsidized—holidays with religious significance.'"*

"How is it that you know so much about United States law?" asked the astonished teacher.

"I've been around a long time," he replied. "And I'm saddened to see so many children think that Christmas is just about getting

video games and CD's. For that matter, it's not just about 'Love' either. It's about the baby Jesus as a gift from God. When I give gifts it is only to remind people of The Gift from God to all of us. I guess I just want kids to turn off the TV and take off their headphones long enough to realize that there are deeper things in life—things that we carry with us from generation to generation. We have a culture with deep roots and I want to give children a little depth...then they can go back to the TV if they must." Santa scooped up his bag, then added, "I guess I've given you the best gift I possibly could. I've given you freedom."

"What do you mean?" the teacher asked.

"For years you've lived under the burden of self-imposed censorship about Christmas. You placed a gag order over your own mouth. Now you can be free from that! You can give to your students what you had as a child in school." He turned and started up the chimney. With a jolly chuckle, he said as he went, "Like the baby Jesus said when he grew up, 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.'"

The End



* see *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 676 (1984)

A MODEL POLICY THAT PASSES CONSTITUTIONAL SCRUTINY

In 1979, the Sioux Falls school district was sued by the ACLU because of its policy on the celebration of religious holidays. On April 22, 1980, the U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, upheld the constitutionality of the school policy. The policy reads as follows:

Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs

It is accepted that no religious belief or non-belief should be promoted by the school district or its employees, and none should be disparaged. Instead, the school district should encourage all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of each other's religious views. The school district should utilize its opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs. In that spirit of tolerance, students and staff members should be excused from participating in practices which are contrary to their religious beliefs unless there are clear issues of overriding concern that would prevent it.

The Sioux Falls School District recognizes that one of its educational goals is to advance the students' knowledge and appreciation of the role that our religious heritage has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization.

Observance of Religious Holidays

The practice of the Sioux Falls School District shall be as follows:

1. The several holidays throughout the year which have a religious and a secular basis may be observed in the public schools.
2. The historical and contemporary values and the origin of religious holidays may be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination.
3. Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday.

4. The use of religious symbols such as a cross, Menorah, crescent, Star of David, creche, symbols of Native American religions or other symbols that are a part of a religious holiday is permitted as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. Among these holidays are included Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, St. Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving and Halloween.
 5. The school district's calendar should be prepared so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths.
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In Florey, the decision of the Court of Appeals held that:

“(1) the school board’s adoption of policy and rules permitting observance of holidays having both a religious and a secular basis was not motivated by an attempt to advance or inhibit religion; (2) the primary effect of the rules was the advancement of a secular program of education, and not a religion; (3) the rules did not unconstitutionally entangle the school district in religion or religious institutions; (4) the rules did not violate the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.”

The Court continued:

“We view the thrust of these rules to be the advancement of the students’ knowledge of society’s cultural and religious heritage, as well as the provision of an opportunity for students to perform a full range of music, poetry and drama that is likely to be of interest to the students and their audience.”

And, further:

“School administrators should, of course, be sensitive to the religious beliefs or disbeliefs of their constituents and should attempt to avoid conflict, but they need not and should not sacrifice the quality of the students’ education.”

* underlining added for emphasis

THE SUPREME COURT'S REMARKS ON RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

In the 1984 Supreme Court case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, involving the constitutionality of a city's display of a Nativity scene, the Court ruled that the display is constitutional. In its ruling, the Court indicated that it assumed public schools were having students sing what it called "Christmas hymns and carols:"

"To forbid the use of this one passive symbol—the creche—at the very time people are taking note of the season with Christmas hymns and carols in public schools and other public places, and while the Congress and legislatures open session with prayers by paid chaplains, would be a stilted overreaction contrary to our history and to our holdings." (465 US 686 - emphasis added)

THE NATIONAL PTA ON RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY SONGS

"Sacred music may be sung or played as part of a school's academic program. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music." (*A Parent's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*; National PTA and First Amendment Center)

A COMMON MISCONCEPTION REGARDING "EQUAL TIME"

Some educators are under the impression that if they teach about Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, they must give equal time to teaching about all holidays in order to be fair.

However, fair does not necessarily mean equal. For example, rookie and veteran teachers do not get equal pay for equal work. They are compensated in proportion to their years of service.

The truth is, no court has said equal time must be given to all the religious holidays. You can find a reasonable guideline for deciding which holidays to emphasize and how much time to devote to them by answering two questions: (1) Which religion or religions have had the most influence in shaping American culture? (2) Which religions have a prominent influence in the local community?

How much time is spent on each holiday should be in proportion to its relevance and influence in American culture and the local community. While avoiding slighting any religion, teachers should not leave students with the impression that all religions have had an equal impact on American culture.

CONSTITUTIONALLY SOUND LESSON PLAN IDEAS

1. Read the Christmas story in class. The historical basis for Christmas is found in the book of Luke, chapter two, in the Bible. Read to the class, or have students take turns reading Luke 2:1-20. You can read about the wise men visiting the baby Jesus in the book of Matthew, chapter two, verses one through twelve.
2. Ask a parent to read the Christmas story to the class and share what the holiday means to his or her family.
3. Have Christian students in your class share what their families or churches are doing to celebrate Christmas.
4. Prepare a lesson on the ways Christianity has affected American culture. You can include such things as: the Pilgrims, Declaration of Independence, the phrase “In God We Trust” on our coins, the abolition movement, the Rev. Martin Luther King’s Christian faith, the origin of our system of law.
5. Lead a class discussion on teachings of Jesus that are often referred to in American culture. You can include: “Do unto others...” (Matthew 7:12), “Go the extra mile” (Matthew 5:41), “Turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39), “Don’t cast your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6), the phrase, “the good Samaritan” (Luke 10:30-37).
6. Have each student write an article for a class newspaper. Some students could write editorials, others could draw cartoons, others could write news stories. Story ideas include: highlighting what a local church is doing for Christmas, what a family is doing, what various ethnic groups do to celebrate the holiday, and the history of Christmas in America.
7. Examine how Christmas is celebrated by Christians in other cultures. Compare and contrast it to how American Christians celebrate the holiday.
8. Sing traditional Christmas carols in class.
9. Include traditional Christmas carols in the school music program.