

"The Gift of Love"

Date: Dec. 9, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Advent 2, Gifts that won't break series

Text: 1 Cor. 13:1-13; 1 John 4:7-21

Theme: Love

Christmas is a time for the telling of stories. Wonderful, heart-warming stories cluster beautifully around Christmas. Here is a beautiful one. Written by M.A. Matthews, it is called "The Gift of a Child."

"The day was frightfully cold...with swirls of snow in the air, and I was looking out the living room window, which faces our church. Volunteers had just finished putting up the annual Nativity scene in the church-yard, when school let out for the day. Children gathered excitedly around the crèche.... but didn't stay for long, it was far too cold for lingering. All the children took a quick glance at the manger scene and then hurried away, all except for a tiny girl of about six.

"The wind lashed at her bare legs and caused her coat to fly open in the front, but she was oblivious of the weather. She was captivated by that manger scene. All her attention was riveted on the statues before her. Which one, I couldn't tell. Was it Mary? The baby? The shepherds? The Wise Men? The animals? I wondered.

"And then a beautiful and poignant moment....I saw her remove her blue woolen head scarf. The wind quickly knotted her hair into a wild tangle, but she didn't seem to notice that either. She had only one thought. Lovingly, she wrapped her scarf around the statue of the Baby Jesus. After she had covered it, she patted the baby and then kissed him on the cheek. Satisfied, she skipped on down the street, her hair frosted with tiny diamonds of ice. As I watched that scene unfold, I realized that Christmas had come once again."

(The Guideposts Christmas Treasury, New York: Doubleday, 1972, p.201)

That touching story raises a question for us to think about together: what is Christmas, and when does it come? Surely Christmas is more than a date on a calendar. Surely Christmas is more than a vague nod in the direction of Bethlehem.

Surely Christmas is more than poinsettias and presents and lights and decorations, as nice as those are. What puts the meaning of Christmas deep into our souls? What writes the Christmas spirit indelibly on our hearts?

Well, of course, the essence of Christmas is love, God's incredible love for us, expressed when he sent his only Son into the world to save us. "Love Came Down at Christmas", that's how the hymn writer puts it. *That's* the answer to our question.

Whenever and wherever we receive God's sacrificial love, whenever and wherever we pass it on to others, whenever and wherever God's love is accepted and shared, Christmas comes once again. But how does it happen? Let me bring the answer closer to home with three suggestions.

First, when we, like the shepherds, fall down in awe, wonder and commitment before the manger of God's love, there is Christmas! When we, like the three wise men, give our best to the Master, there is Christmas! When we, like Mary and Joseph, trust and obey and try to do God's will, there is Christmas!

One of the best-known and most loved verses in all the Bible is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” (NRSV) We needed a Savior and God sent us one. We needed a Messiah and God sent us one. We needed a Christ and God sent us one. God so loved the world that he gave the world his only Son.

When we bow down before that, when we accept God’s love, when we receive the Messiah into our hearts and commit our lives in faith to him, whenever and wherever that happens, there is Christmas.

So, let me ask you – Have you invited Jesus into your heart? Have you asked Jesus to love you, forgive you and then commit your life to living for him? Let me ask the question another way – do you remember when you fell in love with God? When did you first accept the truth that God wildly loves you, so much that God was willing to die on a cross for you?

When we commit our lives to loving God and making God a priority, then Christmas happens. When we make God the highest priority, because of what he has done in his Son, Jesus Christ, Christmas happens. We show him our love with our time, talent and resources; when we show God our love with our regular worship, our private prayers, and our time of devotion and study; and when we allow Jesus to sit on the throne of our hearts and let Him be Lord and Master, then Christmas happens again.

Second, when we love our families, there is Christmas. From the very first silent night long ago in Bethlehem, Christmas has been a family matter. Just as the shepherds were drawn to the stable, even so at

Christmas time we are drawn toward home. “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” is a beloved song we love to hear.

Unfortunately, in many homes this Christmas there will be a chill in the air. You see, there is a big difference between everybody being at home, and being at home with everybody. It’s sad, but in a lot of families there is estrangement – family members who no longer talk to each other; there is division – over the settlement of Dad’s estate, or maybe over current politics; there is hostility – some families just don’t like each other.

How many squabbles will break out this Christmas because somebody got mad? How many obscenities will be screamed? How many embarrassing scenes will unfold when someone has too much to drink or comes to the dinner table “higher than a kite. “

Families should be a place where love is nourished and practiced, but sadly that’s not always true. When we love our families, whether it’s December 25th or not, there is Christmas. When husbands and wives love, honor, respect and cherish each other, there is Christmas. When parents treat their children with respect and children treat their parents with respect, there is Christmas. When we all watch our tone of voice, as well as weigh the words we use, there is Christmas.

How can we love our families? By listening, forgiving, understanding, by showing patience and being sensitive to the needs and concerns of others, by offering to help with specific tasks, and praying for one another. You see, some gifts don’t need to be wrapped. And some gift-wrapped packages, without love, are hollow and empty.

Whenever and wherever there is peace and harmony, tenderness and respect, thoughtfulness and caring in the family, Christmas comes once again. When we love God, and when we love our families, there is Christmas!

Third and finally, when we love other people, there is Christmas. In 1 John 4 we are told that God is love, and those who love God will love other people. And if we hate, then we don't really have the love of God in us. When we love other people as Jesus taught us how to do, then Christmas happens again.

Of course, it starts with loving yourself. We're told to love our neighbors as ourselves; so healthy love of self is the beginning of this great love project. But then we are directed to love others. For many people this means my family, my people, or those who are just like me.

But Jesus pushed the envelope and he told us that we need to make the circle bigger. He showed love for the Samaritans, a hated race of people in his time. He showed love for the outcasts of his society – people like prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors and the poor. Jesus kept making this circle of love bigger and bigger.

Before he left earth he told his disciples to spread the message of his Kingdom of love to the people of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. His kingdom knew no boundaries, His kingdom, not of power and wealth, but His kingdom of love.

When you volunteer to serve at the soup kitchen, when you volunteer at the overnight shelter for the homeless, you show the love of Christ. When you donate clothes for the needy or food for the food pantry, you show the love of Christ. Then, Christmas happens again.

Our love keeps going out in wider and wider circles. Whenever and wherever there is a need, that is where we can be the face of Christ. I know of one family where they have decided not to give each other gifts this year, but instead to donate the money they would have spent to an agency or organization that is helping others.

For them, Christmas is not their birthday, it's Jesus' birthday, and they believe that doing for others instead of themselves would be a wonderful gift to the newborn Savior. Not everyone is called to do that, but let me ask you this. How have you tried to show the love of God for others beyond *your* family at Christmas time?

When we love God, when we love our families, and when we love other people, there is Christmas. The Christmas gift of love is surely a Christmas gift that won't break! Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break* by James W. Moore and Jacob Armstrong, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, pp. 37 – 44.