

“The Gift of Love”

John 1:14

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There is a question I pondered all week and wish to share with you this morning. What does the Christmas story teach us about love? All of us know that Christmas and love go together. Bing Crosby, Perry Como, John Lennon and Clay Aiken remind us of this every year. Even today we lit the candle of love on the Advent wreath. What does the story of Christ's birth teach us about love that we may not discover elsewhere?

I think it is this. **The most loving thing that can be done for another person is to enter their world and compassionately walk with them along their journey.** When we enter their messy and mysterious lives for the purpose of understanding, encouraging and helping them, we give them the greatest gift of all. We also do what Barbara Brown Taylor calls, practicing incarnation.

In an article by that title, Brown writes, “When I was first taught the concept of Incarnation, I was instructed to capitalize it. The Incarnation happened just once, in one person, a very long time ago. In Jesus alone was God's Word Made Flesh. As his follower, my job was to trust that was true and to persuade others that it was true as well. The Incarnation was presented to me as an article of faith. It was a unique event that involved Jesus and no one else, and the fate of my own flesh depended on my acceptance of that fact.”

“Relatively late in life,” she continues, “I have decided that incarnation is less a doctrine than a practice, which Jesus did not come to do once and for all but to show any who were willing how God's word might become flesh in their own lives, too. To practice incarnation is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the Gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them things to think about when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do with and for one another. Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on that would require them to get close enough to touch one another.”

Christmas love, but more importantly, Christian love demands that we touch one another. The one who “became flesh and dwelt among us” will not let us live in isolation, shutting people out of our lives or looking upon others with disdain or indifference. He encourages us to be vulnerable and take risks. He pushes us out of our comfort zone. He requires that we open our eyes and ears so that we can see what we have been overlooking and hear cries we have ignored.

Don't we see this dramatically portrayed in Charles Dickens' “A Christmas Carol?” Were not Ebenezer Scrooge's eyes and ears opened and his cold heart melted when he was visited by the ghosts of the past, present and future? Did he not begin touching people and making a difference in their lives when he realized how much he needed others and they needed him? Didn't he practice incarnation? Isn't this what it means to be the presence of Christ in a broken world? Did he do anything that any of us could not do everyday?

In her book, Life Lessons, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells the story of the effects the cleaning lady was having on patients at a hospital. Kubler-Ross noticed that many of the dying patients felt much better after their rooms had been cleaned. One day she asked the cleaning lady rather curtly what she was doing to the patients when she was cleaning their rooms. “I am only cleaning their rooms,” she replied defensively.

Determined to know how she was making the patients feel better, Kubler-Ross followed the cleaning lady for several days. Finally the cleaning lady grabbed her arm and dragged her into a room behind the nurses' station. She told Kubler-Ross what she was doing that had such a positive impact upon the patients.

“I walk over to them, look them in the eye, touch them and listen to their story. I may want to run but I don’t. I stay there with them because I think that is what real love is.”

Of this woman, Kubler-Ross writes, “Unschooling in the ways of psychology and medicine, this woman knew one of the greatest secrets in life. Love is being there and caring.”

How did this cleaning lady learn this lesson? She sat in a busy emergency room one night holding her six-year-old child that was struggling with pneumonia. Not only was she alone but she could get no attention, and her daughter died in her arms that evening. She made a commitment that would never happen to another person as long as she could do something about it.

I like what Kubler-Ross writes about relationships. “There is no such thing as an insignificant or accidental relationship. Every meeting, encounter or exchange with everyone from a spouse to an anonymous telephone operator, no matter how brief or profound, how positive, neutral or painful is meaningful. In the grand scheme of things, every relationship is potentially important, for what it can teach us about ourselves and what it can do for the other person.”

Who modeled this better than Jesus? Time and again he set aside his agenda and schedule in order to look someone in the eye, more times than not a stranger, and listen to their story. He touched people that others would not because they had been declared unclean and ostracized. What did he tell people that he healed or forgave? Go back home or to the temple and reconnect with people you need and those who need you.

I must tell you that this is not as easy as it sounds. Some of the people in front of you may be unlovable. They may have mistreated you and be undeserving of your time and attention. They may have caught you at a bad time when you were dealing with your own difficult issues. Their needs may be overwhelming and you may feel inadequate and unprepared to help them.

So what are you to do? Are you justified in walking away, hoping someone else will help them? I don’t think so because I don’t believe Christmas love will let you off the hook. For you see, Christmas love is a strong love that is willing to do the difficult and it is a humble love that will do whatever is necessary to be the presence of Christ and help another.

A few years ago, Eloy Cruz was a Spanish speaking pastor in Brooklyn. He was known for his patience and gentleness, practicing incarnation. When asked how he could be kind to people under times of great stress, he replied, “You need only two loves in your life, a love for God and the person in front of you.”

I believe this is Christmas love. Love is particular but not selective. At all times, love God and the person in front of you. Reach out and touch him. Listen to her story. Offer encouragement and hope. Be the presence of Christ in their life. Practice incarnation. There is no greater gift you can offer or they need.