



Clerg-E



An E-Zine for Ministers – December 2007

Messenger in the Mall

By Bass Mitchell

I saw him in the mall. He was about 5'6" and wearing a dark uniform that made you think of the air force or at least some branch of the military service. The cap was the kind you would see a policeman wearing...at least they used to wear them...short bream and looking like it was made of cardboard. On the collar of his coat on both sides was a large "S" in a circle of silver thread. He was holding a red metal bank that had a handle and was constantly rattling the change in it. Behind him were three Angel trees covered with little paper angels that had the names and needs of little children throughout the area. Around the trees were brightly wrapped packages of all shapes and sizes, and people were dropping off more of them as I sat and watched.

There was something else about this jolly fellow standing there. I did not notice it at first. He only used one hand. His other hand was withered looking, drawn back toward his elbow. It was apparently quite unusable.

I walked up to him, put in a donation, and we started to talk. His name is Phillip Priest (it was on his name tag). What a great name. He's 36 years

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old and has worked with the Salvation Army since he was 14 (for 22 years!). He's taking classes to become an officer (ordained) and his girlfriend is too. I asked him how the donations were going this year.

"Not as much as last year," he said. "People are kind of stingy this year for some reason." I stood there looking at the people passing by, most holding arm loads of presents to take to loved ones. It was obvious there was no shortage of money, anyway.

I got up the courage to ask about his hand. He told me that it happened at birth, that the midwife "yanked" on his arm in such a way that permanent damage was caused. But he was not bitter at all. It did not seem to bother him or hinder him in the least.

And we talked about his plans, why he was doing what he was doing...and it all came around to the fact that he just loved Jesus and people...that he had no choice but to follow the path before him...

I thanked him for what he was doing and said that I would keep him in my prayers. You do, too.

For in the midst of the mall, among thousands of people out looking for gifts for themselves or those they love, there stands a small man with a withered arm who spends day and night there seeking gifts not for himself but for others - little children, the hungry, the homeless...it was to me as if Jesus himself was standing there that day...

Lord, thank you for Phillip Priest and all those like him. They challenge and humble us in their unselfish giving and in their priorities this season. They are surely closer to the kingdom than I often am. Bless him in his studies and in his upcoming marriage. And thank you for his witness in the midst of the mall. Amen.

Lectionary Resources

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Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy

By Bron Yocum--
First United Methodist Church
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WEEK ONE



VOICE 1: If you move aside the tinsel, sweep away the cookie crumbs and push past the torn wrapping paper, you will come at last to the heart of Christmas. Even then, it takes patience and a listening ear to understand God's purpose in the events of that first Christmas. The prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before the birth of Christ, heard the whispers of what was to come, and gave his people hope. Hear his words in Isaiah 21:1-5, which you can find on page ___ of the Old Testament portion of your pew bible.

VOICE 2: Read Isaiah 2:1-5

VOICE 3: Isaiah speaks to people facing the threat of invasion, to peasants barely able to scrape together enough to buy that day's bread. To all of them, he gives this counsel: hope in the Lord. There is reason for hope, he declares. God will provide a future, and will free captive Israel to love and serve the Lord in the world. And so today, we light the candle of Hope.

VOICE 4: Let us pray:

God of hope, we live in a world gone awry. Plowshares are beaten into swords, school age children wield guns and sin infects every corner of our lives. Give us reason to hope, Lord. Remind us of the good news you sent us that first Christmas, and help us to wait in joyful anticipation until Christ comes again. Amen.

SUNG RESPONSE: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verse 1

WEEK TWO

VOICE 1: At the heart of Christmas is a dream. Not the dream of a white Christmas or of sugar plums, but the dream of a world set right. It's a dream of people living together in harmony, all creation reconciled and restored to God's purposes. Everyone will be our neighbor, people we care about and who care us. And our concern will extend to creatures great and small. Hear how Isaiah describes that dream in the eleventh chapter, verses 1 through 10.

VOICE 2: Read Isaiah 11:1-10

VOICE 3: Yes, it is a dream not yet realized. What a vision. It is a dream of shalom, of the wholeness and healing of all creation. It is the world living in peace, with all creatures reconciled to one another. This peace is our hope for the future, but it is also our guide. It shows us what God intended for the creation, and invites us to begin to live into that vision even now. Peace will not come in one fell swoop from outside us. It will be realized little by little as God works in and through us to bring about peace and to teach the world the meaning of reconciliation. And so today we light the candle of Peace.

VOICE 4: Let us pray:

God of peace, we live in a world of conflict. From battlefields to boardrooms, we choose up sides and struggle with each other, creating winners and losers, victors and defeated. Open our hearts to the dream of peace, to the ways of reconciliation rather than conflict. Let us live as participants in that dream, so that our lives may stand as a signal to the world of your good news. Amen.

SUNG RESPONSE: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verse 4

WEEK THREE

VOICE 1: The joy of Christmas morning under the tree is so fragile. When the clothes are the wrong size or a part is missing or we forgot to buy batteries, our initial joy disappears in disappointment or frustration. But the joy that lies at the heart of Christmas is not diminished by temporary setbacks. The true joy of Christmas is the confidence that comes despite setbacks. It is the joy we know when everything around us is a desert wasteland, but we still believe God's promise that even the desert will bloom and be filled with life. We know in our heart that the wilderness will rejoice, the weak will be made strong and God's people will find that their joy is not in trees and presents and shiny ornaments, but in the promises of God. Isaiah's poetry brings that to life in chapter 35, verses 1 through 10.

VOICE 2: Read Isaiah 35:1-10

VOICE 3: Isaiah was speaking to a people who knew despair intimately. They had been carried off to Babylon as captives. Home seemed like a far off dream – across the vast wasteland that separated Babylon from Judea. The desert was a cruel place, dry and lifeless, just like their lives in Babylon. But God promises that even that desert will bloom and burst with life. It won't happen because of what the people do, but because of who God is – the one who has the power to open the eyes of the blind, to create pools of water on desert sands, even to raise the dead. The deserts of our lives may look different, but the promise is the same. "Here is your God. He will come and save you." How can we not rejoice and sing for joy. And so we light the third candle on our Advent wreath, the pink candle, the candle of joy.

VOICE 4: Let us pray:

God of joy, give us the confidence to rejoice in your promises. Remind us again that you have the power to bring flowers out of desert sands and streams in dry river beds. You have promised a new beginning to people facing dead ends; you have given new life to those who knew only death. Fill our hearts with joy as we celebrate that good news and wait with patience for you to fulfill your promise. Let us rejoice that now and forever, our God reigns. Amen.

SUNG RESPONSE: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verse 6

WEEK FOUR

VOICE 1: At the heart of Christmas is the most amazing claim – that God, the one who is the all powerful creator, the one who can speak worlds into being – that very God would set aside all the glory and majesty of being God to come and live with us. God didn't come with lightening and thunder to frighten us into obedience; nor did God come with awesome power to force us to live God's way. God came in love, to live the very life we live, to be God with us and to save us from our sin. Isaiah saw God's love present in the

birth of a special child. His prophecy foretold the birth of a child not only in his own era, but in the time ahead, when another would be known as Immanuel, God with us. Hear how Isaiah describes God's act of gracious love.

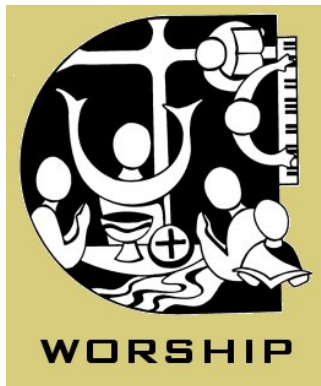
VOICE 2: Read Isaiah 7:10-16

VOICE 3: Immanuel – God with us. What an amazing promise. God has given us a sign in the birth of a baby, a sign to give us hope. And that sign is the ultimate act of love, an incredible act of self-sacrifice. Jesus Christ began life in sacrifice, giving up all the trappings of divinity, setting aside his power and majesty to come as a tiny baby. The one who holds our fate in his hands, allowed himself to be held in our hands as a helpless infant. His entire life, from birth to death, showed us the meaning of sacrificial love. And so we light the fourth candle this morning, the candle of love.

VOICE 4: Let us pray:

God of grace, in Jesus Christ you came to live as one of us, offering yourself to us in love and humility. You whom all the angels adore, you whom the earth proclaims creator, you came to us in weakness, a tiny baby laid in manger. Give us the grace to see your presence in the babe of Bethlehem. May we acknowledge you as our Lord, and offer you our gifts of love and obedience this Christmas. Amen.

SUNG RESPONSE: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verse 7



Christmas Communion Poem

John Betjeman wrote:

No love that in a family dwells,
 No carolling in frosty air,
 Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
 Can with this simple Truth compare --
 That God was Man in Palestine
 And lives today in Bread and Wine.

The Good Gifts, the Best Gifts

Rev. Pamela J. Tinnin
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In 1971 when I was 25, my husband and I and our two young children lived in an old hotel in a small town called Scotts Mills, Oregon. The hotel's heyday was long gone, along with the time when each Saturday the streets bustled with the local farmers and loggers who brought their wives in to shop. The tall false front looked like the backdrop for a Western movie and there was even a hitching rail in front of the board sidewalk that ran along the bay windows of ancient glass that seemed to ripple in the light.

The inside had been gutted and remodeled by the previous tenants, a commune of young families, drop-outs and runaways who had escaped the city and the violence they thought they could leave behind—a war that never seemed to end, some of our best and brightest leaders shot dead, a country where the generations had turned on each other. We had come there looking for some peace, too, though what we found was quite different than what we sought.

That first fall and winter in the old hotel was hard. The woodstove made from two 50-gallon oil barrels didn't keep the place warm, the pipes broke in a rare winter storm that brought temperatures crashing into the twenties, and I cooked all our meals on a two-burner hot plate and in a toaster oven.

But we were young and it all seemed like a great adventure. But then, not long before Thanksgiving, my husband lost his job. His just above

minimum wages weren't much, but they were all we had and we quickly went through our small savings. The unemployment checks based on his income barely managed to cover the utilities and the bare essentials.

As Christmas approached, I grew grimmer by the day. It had always been my favorite time of year, but this year I dreaded it. After surviving his first tour there, in June my kid brother had returned to Vietnam, my best friend had moved clear across the country, and my father and I had argued bitterly over the war. Each morning, my six-year-old asked, "How many days 'til Santa?" How could I bring Santa for her and her two-year-old brother when I wasn't sure whether the groceries would last the week?

Their father looked for work each day, but with the mills closed, there were fifty men for every opening. A neighbor hired him to cut wood for a few days, but the money was quickly gone for gas and a used tire for our old car. I did babysit several afternoons in exchange for some knit sweater material that I spent several evenings sewing into turtle necks and stocking caps for the kids. Mostly we waited—for a change in our luck, for a job, perhaps for a miracle—but the days passed, one after another.

The night before Christmas Eve, I couldn't sleep. Finally I crept out of bed and climbed down from the sleeping loft. I threw on a robe and went out to lean against the hitching rail, looking up at a sky that was filled with stars. Standing there hugging my robe close, the sound of the wind in the trees, I thought of my children and husband asleep inside, of my

family who refused to give up on me, of the good friends who would share our table on Christmas Day.

I sent a silent prayer up to where I hoped God was waiting, perhaps listening for the feeble prayers of those like me who had lost their way. My own words surprised me, not what I had thought to say at all. "Thank you, Lord, for all of this... and please, teach me to live with grace, no matter what. Just teach me to live with some grace."

I went to bed and slept, slept until late the next morning, not waking until my husband called up to me, "Pam, I think you'd better come down here." I stumbled down the stairs, rubbing sleep from my eyes, trying to smooth my hair. My husband led me over to the back door that opened onto the driveway.

When he opened the door there stood my brother, tall and dark and so very thin, home from the war. He grinned wide and said, "Ho, ho, ho" and stepped back to point at his little Datsun sedan, filled to the roof with boxes wrapped in red and green and shiny gold paper, gifts from him, my parents, my sisters. There were cellophane wrapped platters of decorated sugar cookies, divinity, and homemade peanut brittle, two bottles of dark red wine, a smoky ham and two pumpkin pies. I reached out and held on to my brother until I heard my daughter say, "Don't cry, Mama... Uncle Joe brought Christmas."

Advent is a time of waiting—perhaps you're waiting, too—for a job, a change in your relationships, maybe a change in your luck. Or like me, are you waiting... hoping... for a miracle? An end

to all the wars. Food enough for everyone. A change of hearts in the leaders in Washington. The thing is, the miracle is with us, now and always—Jesus, the One who came to open our eyes to the gifts all around us, the good gifts, the perfect gifts, the gifts that only come from God.

May you have a joyous, grace-filled Christmas. Peace and blessings from your sister on the journey, Pam

Light from the

Lectionary Leader pages give questions to use in leading the study session. Student pages give explanations and reflections on the readings to use as handouts for study groups. _

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Lectionary Leaf

Imagine the difference for worshippers if they are prepared for worship service by reading the upcoming passages. Use *Lectionary Leaf* weekly as a take-home resource in bulletins.

I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've just been that way ever since."

**Second Sunday of
Advent**

December 9, 2007

Isaiah 11:1-10 Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 Romans 15:4-13 Matthew 3:1-12

Topic: Abound in Hope

Text: Romans 15:4-13

I've always loved that word "abound." It means to "over flow, to exceed, to have more than enough." Paul tells us in this passage to "abound, to over flow, to exceed, to have more than enough - HOPE."

Is that what you are abounding in this Advent, hope?

It seems not many people are abounding in hope this year. Far from it. They are abounding in fear, in worry, in anxiety...

Where will the terrorist strike next? Will I lose my job? Will the market crash? Will my son be safe in the armed forces? Will we have enough money to even give gifts at Christmas?

Not too many people abounding in hope these days. Despair seems to be over flowing in many lives, maybe even in yours.

But Paul comes along this Advent and tells us as Christians to "abound in hope." What does he mean and can that really happen? Can hope replace our despair, our fear and worry? Let's see what he says...

**Third Sunday of
Advent**

December 16, 2007

Isaiah 35:1-10 Psalm 146:5-10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11
or
Luke 1:47-55

Topic: The Sound of Christmas Music

Text: Luke 1:47-55

Mary sings. So many other Christmas characters sing as well, especially in Luke's Gospel.

Why not make this service one of singing? Let the hills come alive with the sound of Christmas music.

I have several carol fests on the web site at:
<http://www.homiliesbyemail.com/Special/Christmas/christmas.html>

Pick and adapt one.

You might give a little devotion on music as a medium for sharing the Good News of the birth of Christ.

You might even arrange it so that the congregation gets to choose their favorite Christmas carols.

**Fourth Sunday of
Advent**

December 23, 2007

Isaiah 7:10-16 Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-25

Topic: Something About That Name
Text: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Use that praise chorus, "Something About that Name," to talk about the names given to Christ here in this text, both of which identify him and describe what he would do...

Immanuel = God with us. In Christ God comes to be one of us, one with us, one for us

Jesus = God saves or God will save. Could there be a more appropriate name for him than this?



Nativity of the Lord -
 December 24 & 25, 2007

Isaiah 52:7-10 Psalm 98 Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12) John 1:1-14

Topic: The Real Meaning of Christmas

Henry Carter, a pastor and an administrator of a home for emotionally disturbed children, tells of an encounter he had one Christmas Eve that gave him a new insight and perspective. He was busy with last minute preparations for the worship service, when one of the floor mothers came to say that Tommy had crawled under his bed and refused to come out. He followed her up the stairs and looked at the bed she pointed out. Not a hair or a toe showed beneath it. So he talked to Tommy as if he were addressing the bucking broncos on the bedspread. He talked about the brightly lighted tree, the packages underneath it and the other good things that were waiting for Tommy out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting about the time this was costing, Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the spread. Two enormous blue eyes looked out at him. Tommy was 8, but looked like a 5 year-old. He could easily have pulled him out. But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed - it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative. So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. He told of the stocking with Tommy's name on it, provided by the Women's Society.

Silence. There was no indication Tommy heard or that he even cared about Christmas.

At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in beside Tommy, snagging his sport coat on the bedsprings on the way. He lay there with his cheek pressed against the floor for a long time. He talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally running out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Tommy.

After a bit, a small child's chilled hand slipped into his. Henry said, "You know, Tommy, it is kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up." As they slid out from under the bed, Henry realized he had been given a glimpse of the mystery of Christmas. Hadn't God called us too, as God had called Tommy, from far above us? With God's stars and mountains and God's whole majestic creation, hadn't God pleaded with us to love God and to enjoy the universe God gave us as a gift?

And when we wouldn't listen, God had drawn closer. Through the prophets and lawgivers, God spoke to us in them.

But it was not until that first Christmas, until God stooped to earth it self, until God took our very place and came to dwell with us in our loneliness and alienation, that we, like Tommy, dared to stretch out our hands to take hold of God's love.

Have you taken hold of God's hand? You can right here, right now.

Two Sermon Series for Advent

This Way to Bethlehem
(Skits, Stories & Sermons)

Journey to Bethlehem
(4 sermons on the Wise Men)

Bible Studies for Advent

For Unto You a Savior Is Born (5 sessions from Luke))

Messiah Is Born (5 sessions from Matthew)

Light from the Lectionary for Advent

For more information, go to:

<http://www.homiliesbyemail.com>

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Sermon of the Month

Clerg-E accepts submissions for consideration for Sermons of the Month. Send them to clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com and include if possible a digital photo and brief bio information.

The Man at the Manger

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

By Bass Mitchell

A worried mother phoned the church office on the afternoon before the annual Christmas program to say that her small son, who was to play the role of Joseph in the Christmas play, had a cold and had gone to bed on doctor's orders. "It's too late now to get another Joseph," the director of the play said. "We'll just have to write him out of the script." And they did, and few of those who watched that night realized that the cast was incomplete.

Joseph, the man at the manger, is easy to leave out and overlook. Most all the other characters, even the animals, seem to be better known and remembered. Even in the Gospels themselves, Joseph is mentioned only a few times. In fact, he's not mentioned by name at all in the Gospel of Mark! It seems that Joseph, the quiet man at the manger, just isn't as important as the others.

But in today's account in Matthew, we see that Joseph was indeed a central character. That he had an important role to play in God's plan. And we also see a depth of love and character in this man at the manger which would serve as a model for men and women.

His Name

"Joseph" - his name reminds us of the great patriarch in the Old Testament who was turned over as a slave by his own brothers. Isn't it interesting that like that Joseph of old, this Joseph was also a righteous man, influenced by dreams, and who also would go to Egypt?

His Work

Joseph was a craftsman. He worked with his hands. He is called a "tekton" in Greek which means "carpenter, builder, or mason." It is likely that Joseph made his living with wood and stone (which was more plentiful than wood). I have a feeling that Joseph was a kind of handy-man, the person in the village, just like we have today, who could build you just about whatever you needed. Some scholars think that Joseph traveled a great deal in his work. In fact, some suggest that when he was taking Mary to Bethlehem, he was actually moving there. We know that there was a stonemason's guild in Bethlehem which would have been useful in helping Joseph secure employment.

His Lineage

Did you notice that the angel in our text addresses Joseph as "Descendant of David" or literally as "son of David." In chapter one of Matthew, the lineage of Jesus is traced through Joseph back to David and Abraham. Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, but he adopts Jesus or becomes the foster father of Jesus and, like a father would, as we see in the text, gives the child the name "Jesus." Thus, Jesus becomes in the eyes of the law a descendant of David. This was important for it was believed that the Messiah would be born in David's lineage. Some scholars suggest that perhaps Mary herself was also a descendant of David.

His Age

At the time of our passage from Matthew, Mary must have been around 12 to 13 years old. We do not know how old Joseph was. A tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages suggests that he was considerably older than Mary and must have died perhaps before Jesus began his public ministry. This explains why there's so little about him in the Gospels. But there is no evidence in the Gospels that he was much older than Mary. Death then, as now, can come to young and old.

His Relationship With Mary

It is possible that Joseph and Mary had been chosen for one another since their childhood. Many marriages in those days were arranged by parents. How would you like that - having your parents chose who you would marry? This was the engagement period. There were two other steps for a Jewish marriage in those days. The next step was betrothal. This took place when the children had come of age - about 12 or so. It was a kind of ratification of the arrangement made in childhood by their parents. At this point Mary or Joseph could have nullified the agreement, that is, decided not to marry. But if they agreed to be married, they were then considered betrothed, that is, in the eyes of the law, legally married. Betrothal could only be undone by divorce. Betrothal lasted about a year. After that year, the third step took place - the marriage itself. With great ceremony and festivity, the man came to the home of his fiance and then took her back to his home.

In today's text we see that Joseph and Mary were in step two - they were betrothed, that is, legally married, but were not yet living together as man and wife.

I think all his life Joseph had loved Mary. He could hardly believe that it was almost time for her at last to be his wife. He had made all the arrangements, got the rabbi ready, the elders of the city perhaps to witness the wedding and pronounce their blessings, and perhaps had hired the best caterers. Maybe, like all husbands to be, he was nervous but also very happy.

His Dilemma

There is a story told of a little girl who drew a picture of the nativity scene. Her father, looking at his daughter's drawing, asked, "Why is one of Joseph's legs so much longer than the other?" "He's stomping his foot," the little girl explained. "He wanted a girl!"

I don't know if Joseph stomped his foot, but he sure must have felt like it when he found out Mary was pregnant. The woman he loved so much was going to have a baby, a baby who he knew was not his own. We don't know how he found out. Mary probably told him. Maybe she tried to explain to him how it all happened and what the angel said to her. If she did, Joseph must not have believed it at that time. Joseph, like any man would be, was deeply hurt, confused and even angry. And think of how people would talk. This matter would bring great shame and humiliation on him and his family.

His Options

Verse 19 says that "Joseph was a man who always did the right thing." Literally it reads, "Joseph was a just man." This means he was a godly, righteous man. He loved God and God's laws. He tried his best to follow God's laws in his own life. So, he turns to that law for guidance in what to do with Mary. According to the law, he had two options:

Option One - Bring charges against her in public. Accuse her of adultery. This might well result in her death for the law called for the death penalty.

Option Two - to divorce her privately. In the presence of two witnesses, he could write out a paper of divorce and present it to her. This would not involve pressing charges against her.

Joseph had decided to take option two. That says much about him. In his anger and hurt, he could have lashed out at her, tried to make her suffer as he was suffering. But Joseph loved her too much for that.

His Decision

Joseph may have spent many sleepless nights, tossing and turning, troubled by all that had happened, praying, wanting to do the right thing. One night, when he finally does manage to fall asleep, he has a dream. And in his dream an angel tells him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The child will be a son and you will name him Jesus - for he will save his people from their sins." He would obey.

Lots of people contribute his decision to this dream and I know it played an important role. But I think we once again attribute too little to Joseph. He still had a choice. He could have said "No!" He could have attributed it to some silly dream that doesn't mean anything. But he doesn't. He doesn't because in his heart he still loved Mary and would always love her. He needed just a little nudge, just a little push toward doing what his heart told him to do. That dream provided it.

But I wonder, too, my friends, if he did this not just out of love for Mary but also a love for the child she was carrying, a love that would grow and grow?

A New Law - Love

I tell you that this is as remarkable and beautiful example of self-sacrificing love as you will find in the Bible, apart from that of Jesus himself. The law stated his options clearly - both involved judgment and punishment. But Joseph here learns of a new and even greater law – the law of love.

Is it not interesting that the child to be born would set forth that law of love in even a greater way? Love was the essence of the life and teachings of Jesus. The religious leaders of his day were always putting the law, as least how they understood it, above people. But not Jesus. No healing on the Sabbath. That was considered work and a breaking of the commandment. But Jesus healed on the Sabbath anyway, because there was an even greater law which applied. When the woman who was brought before Jesus and accused to adultery, the law clearly stated that she was to be stoned. But Jesus saw an even greater law - the law of love. And Jesus goes on to the ultimate act of selfless love - the giving of his life on a cross for a guilty, sinful world.

Could it be that Jesus learned something of such love, not just from his Heavenly Father, but also from the man at the manger, his foster father who must have modeled such love for Jesus?

And I wonder something else. No one ever talked so much about God as a loving Father as did Jesus. Jesus even taught us when we pray to say, "Our Father..." Surely this image came from Jesus' own sense of closeness to the Heavenly Father. But is it not possible that Jesus could speak so lovingly of God as a Father because Joseph modeled such fatherly love in his relationship with Jesus?

Who has not caroled Mary,
 And who her praise would dim?
 But what of humble Joseph:
 Is there no song for him?

If Joseph had not driven
 Straight nails through honest wood:
 If Joseph had not cherished
 His Mary as he should;

If Joseph had not proved him
 A man both kind and wise,
 Would he have drawn with favor
 The Child's all-probing eyes?

Would Christ have prayed "Our Father,"
 Or cried that Name in death,
 Unless he first had honored
 Joseph of Nazareth? -Gilbert Thomas.

Are You a Christian?

by Rev. Skip Jackson
Indianola Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

www.indianolapres.org

How do you react when somebody comes up to you and asks you this question? What do you answer?

Me, I know I'm a Christian. I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. Of this I have no doubt. But even though I'm a pastor, I must admit that at times I wince when faced with this question. I never know just where it's coming from. Is this someone who's absolutely sure what it takes to be a Christian -- perhaps being a "born again" social conservative -- and they're pretty darn sure I don't qualify? Or is this someone who has suffered some terrible experience at the hands of people calling themselves Christians? It's easy to feel stuck somewhere between defense and apology. In either case, I'd like my answer to open these people to a larger, more complete understanding of what it might mean to be a Christian -- to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Years ago while recording a "Prairie Home Companion" show, Garrison Keillor commented, "Christmas is the best publicity Jesus will get this year. The rest of the year, his name is connected with Christians, a dull and often cruel people not known for their imagination or taste."

My sense was and is that Keillor said this with more than a touch of sadness and regret. His faith comes through far too clearly in his monologues about the town and people of Lake Wobegone for it to be otherwise. Yet I also hear the truth in

his words, for I've witnessed (as well as experienced) the reality of the cruelty.

All too often "Christian" ends up being used like an exclusive name or label for some sort of private club -- a way of saying, "We're in, and you're out." All too often, a dividing line is established on the basis of a particular form of spiritual experience or adherence to some specific body of doctrine. Everything's black and white. Christians (good ones, that is) are in, and non-Christians and those who don't measure up are out.

The Bible is scoured for definitive answers and reduced to a combination rule book and science text. Rules, of course, make it easy to watch out for and identify rule-breakers (aka sinners) so they can be rejected. "We're good, but they're EVIL. We're 'Saved.' They're 'Condemned.'" Such a dividing line becomes eternal. You can almost hear the self-satisfied "We're going to heaven, and they're NOT! Nyaah! Nyaah! Nyaah!" It all seems so very cruel and heartless.

The divisions and separations established by Christians can make it terribly hard to see the Good News that is Jesus Christ. Jesus was not primarily interested in dividing and separating people. (Oh, I know all about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, but Jesus addressed those words to people who were themselves making such divisions, and the story makes it clear that no one knows just where they stand in this life.)

Jesus Christ came into this world to save all -- everything and everybody! No one is left out! Take a look at John 3:17 -- "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The Greek word for "world" in the text is "kosmos." Salvation is cosmological. You can't get any bigger or more inclusive than that!

We are told that at the end of his life Jesus Christ hung on a cross suffering, and he looked down not in judgment but in grace. Why, he even looked down upon those who were actively involved in the process of killing him, but he still didn't shut anyone out. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" [Luke 23:34].

Imagine that!

For me, Christians are actually folk who can "Imagine that!" They are people of incredible imagination -- people who, somehow through God's grace, have been led to imagine that God loves and desires to save everything and everyone. And they can't help living out of and sharing this Good News that "Everybody's in, and nobody's out!" As we enter Advent (the church's New Year) and approach Christmas, let us resolve to be Christians in this sense. May we as Christians endeavor to be "the best publicity Jesus Christ will get."



I Love My Church is a 5-week program to help members renew their membership vows to the church: prayers, presence, gifts, and service. It concludes with a service of Thanksgiving for the church. It includes detailed instructions. POWER POINT slides for this resource also available.

Order

Holy Humor

We are always looking for humor that can be used in preaching, teaching, bulletins, or church newsletters. If you have a joke or something funny that has happened to you, send it to clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com

You might be a Redneck if... You've ever done your Christmas shopping at a truck stop.

After being away on business for a week before the Christmas Holiday, Bob thought it would be nice to bring his wife a gift.

"How about some perfume?" he asked the cosmetics woman at the Department Store. So, she showed him a bottle of \$50 perfume.

"That's a bit much," said Bob. The woman then returned with a smaller bottle costing \$30.

Bob complained, "That's still a lot of money."

Growing disgusted, the woman brought out her smallest little bottle of \$15 perfume.

Bob grew even more restless and replied, "No no... What I mean is I'd like to see something really cheap!"

So the clerk handed him a mirror!!

It was nearly Christmas and Judge Judy was in a happy mood. She asked the defendant, "What are you being prosecuted for?"

"Doing my Christmas shopping too early," replied the defendant.

"That's not a crime," replied Judge Judy.

"How early were you doing your Christmas shopping?"

"Before the store opened," replied the defendant!!

It was the day after Christmas at a church in San Francisco. The pastor of the church was looking over the cradle when he noticed that the baby Jesus was missing from among the figures. Immediately he turned and went outside and saw a little boy with a red wagon, and in the wagon was the figure of the little infant, Jesus.

So he walked up to the boy and said, "Well, where did you get Him, my fine friend?"

The little boy replied, "I got him from the church."

"And why did you take him?"

The boy said, "Well, about a week before Christmas I prayed to the little Lord Jesus and I told him if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas I would give him a ride around the block in it."

T'was the night before Christmas and all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care.
They'd been worn all week and needed the air.

Maria went to the Post Office to buy stamps for her Christmas cards.' What denomination?' asked the clerk. 'Oh! Good heavens! Have we come to this?' said Maria, 'Well give me 50 Methodist and 50 Church of England ones please.'

It was coming up to Christmas and Sammy asked his mum if he could have a new bike. So, she told him that the best idea would be to write to Santa Claus. But Sam, having just played a vital role in the school nativity play, said he would prefer to write to the baby Jesus. So his mum told him that would be fine. Sam went to his room and wrote ' Dear Jesus, I have been a very good boy and would like to have a bike for Christmas.' But he wasn't very happy when he read it over. So he decided to try again and this time he wrote 'Dear Jesus, I'm a good boy most of the time and would like a bike for Christmas.' He read it back and wasn't happy with that one either. He tried a third version. 'Dear Jesus, I could be a good boy if I tried hard and especially if I had a new bike.' He read that one too, but he still wasn't satisfied. So, he decided to go out for a walk while he thought about a better approach. After a short time he passed a house with a small statue of the Virgin Mary in the front garden. He crept in, stuffed the statue under his coat, hurried home and hid it under the bed. Then he wrote this letter. 'Dear Jesus, If you want to see your mother again, you'd better send me a new bike.'

A few days before Christmas, two young brothers were spending the night at their grandparent's house. When it was time to go to bed, and anxious to do the right thing, they both knelt down to say their prayers.

Suddenly, the younger one began to do so in a very loud voice.

"Dear Lord, please ask Santa Claus to bring me a play-station, a mountain-bike and a telescope."

His older brother leaned over and nudged his brother and said, "Why are you shouting

your prayers? God isn't deaf."

"I know" he replied, "But Grandma is!"

O Noble Christ

By Bass Mitchell

O noble Christ,
Great Physician to me;
the deaf now hear,
the blind now see.

O divine Christ,
Mysterious God concealed;
the veil now torn,
God's face revealed.

O gentle Jesus,
Good Shepherd you lead;
the lost now found,
the sheep now feed.

O human Jesus,
Son of man we see;
in your human life
who we are called to be.

O refreshing Rain,
Water of Life you give;
the thirsty now drink,
the dead now live.

O wondrous Christ,
Risen Lord you reign;
all knees now bow,
all praise your name.

O delicious Food,
Bread of Heaven, divine yeast;
the hungry now eat,
the soul now feasts.

O lowly Christ Child,
Mary's little son;
all humankind,
new day begun.

O majestic Christ,
Prince of Peace you came;
that war might end,
harmony might reign.

O wise Jesus,
Great Teacher you yearn;
minds to be open,
hearts to discern.

O brilliant Christ,
Morning Star so bright;
night now ended,
darkness now light.

Candle Nubs...

A devotional by Bass

You did not know my grandmother.
Well, how could you? She was mine and she lived in North Carolina.

Your loss. She was a wonderful woman, yet, strange. Some might even say weird.

Well, she had a weird name, "Tempie." Now that makes "Bass" should kind of normal.

She had strange eyes that seemed to look right inside you, know what you were thinking and feeling. I could never hide a thing from her.



Grandmother Tempie would often sit around and tell me stories about when she was a little girl, about the days before you could flip a switch and have instant light, about walking to school, about biscuits with collards in them at school for that's all the food they had...

She had seven children (one was my mom). I grew up around these aunts and uncles. Some of them, the men mainly, ended up becoming alcoholics like their father. Yeah, forgot to tell you about my grandfather. His name was Murray. He loved the bottle, any bottle. And I remember being just a little lad riding with my mom and dad looking for grandfather. Sometimes he would pass out in the woods and we had to go look for him. Even though a boy, I could see the pain on my grandmother's face...and even then I vowed not to add to that pain, never to deepen those wrinkles of worry...and hope I kept that promise...

Why this trip down memory lane? Well, it started today with a candle...a long, red Christmas candle that sits on my desk. I like to write while it burns, it's tiny light and warmth comforting me, coaxing me to bring some light and warmth with my words...well, it had burned down to just a nub of itself, giving it's life slowly for me...no complaints, no whining, not asking for anything, just giving itself until it had nothing else to give...

And suddenly I was a boy again. Grandmother Tempie was sitting in her favorite rocking chair. I had found a cigar box somewhere in her house and looked inside. There were the nubs of many multi-colored candles. Some had but a wisp of a wick left and others the thinnest bit of long dried wax. For some reason she had saved these. And there were other cigar boxes filled as well.

"What are these, Grandmother?" I asked her, holding out one box for her to see. Of course, I knew what they were but not why they were, why she had saved them.

She took the box in her aged hands and a smile spread over her face, making it look somehow younger. And I thought that her eyes moistened just a little and was beginning to think that I had hurt her...but it was not pain I saw there, it was something else, something deeper...something she had forgotten but very much needed then...

After a few moments, she looked down at me and said, "These are my prayer candles. For many nights I would light one for your grandfather and your aunts and uncles. It was my prayer, as long as it burned, that God would watch over them and keep them safe."

She picked out one of the candle nubs that had exhausted itself on some long ago night. She looked at it, turning it over and over in her hands.

"I had forgotten about them," she continued. "I know it sounds silly, but they brought me a great deal of comfort. Just a little light in the darkness is a precious thing, my boy."

"But why...?" I started to ask, but not knowing if I should.

"Why did I save them?" she finished for me. "Because I just could not throw them away. They had given their little lives to give me light and comfort. I could not bring myself to just discard them. Silly, isn't it?"

"I don't think so, Grandmother," I replied. "You should see the things I have saved in my cigar box at home."

She smiled and placed her hand on my head. Then she cupped my face in both hands and said, "I've got an idea." And she got up and went to her room. I heard her moving some things around. She came back with a small, long box and a brown paper bag. She took off the lid and there were candles, white and red and purple. And in the bag she took out some candle holders. Together we lit those candles, her last few prayer candles...and I know at least one of them was for me...and they burned into the night and into my memory...

Dear Lord of Light, how can I thank You enough for all you have done for me. Scattered all about my life I see them, Lord, candle nubs, the lives of so many like my grandmother, who exhausted themselves for me and so many others, not holding back anything for our good, so that we might have light and life.

But best of all, brightest of all, Lord of Light, was the Great Christ Candle you gave us in Bethlehem, whose light has touched us all, Your great Prayer Candle for us all...who burned and burned and burned and gave and gave and gave of himself, his holder a cross, leaving just a candle nub...a broken, pierced body. But what light he gave, Lord!

What light he still gives! For Easter came and this sacred Candle was reformed and relit, never to be extinguished again.

Help me be such a candle, Lord, unafraid to give until there's nothing left, just a candle nub, for I know that you have a special place for candle nubs, an honored place...but even if You did not, I still want to burn in the night for You and those you have given me. Amen.

The Bass **BLOG**

Kicked Out

Most folks don't know (probably don't really care) that I was born in the Old North State (North Carolina), so I like to keep up with news from there. One item came across my desk recently. Seems that the North Carolina Baptist State Convention kicked out one of its churches, one in Charlotte, because it was welcoming gay and lesbians without trying to change them. The pastor of that church protested, "Jesus welcomed those considered outcasts and sinners by his culture and religion." But his words fell on deaf ears. Lots of Jesus' words did the same (still are).

This issue is one that's not going to go away, nor should it. My own denomination, United Methodist, is facing it. We are at odds over just what to do about homosexuals (though to some there is no debate about it at all). The answer of that brave pastor in Charlotte is to love and accept them, and trust the grace of God to do whatever changes in them that God deems necessary, which is what I think we do with most everyone else, is it not? If the only persons who can enter and stay in the church are sinless folks, my, we are going to have a lot of empty churches. I wonder if the Baptist Convention is going to kick out all its churches that do not take vigorous actions to "change" all the sinners who come through its doors?

But maybe my Baptist brethren are onto something here. Maybe we should be more concerned about helping persons to "change," to grow and mature in their faith. I fear we stop being very concerned when we just get them to become members. We baptize and forget them. But I am not convinced the way to do that is singling out people or groups. It seems to me that our role is to welcome people just as they are and then hold up Christ as the model for who they can become, letting persons determine in their own hearts just how that applies to them, supporting and helping them as much as we can in that discernment.

From my perspective, anyway, one of the greatest changes we Christians need to make is to stop being so judgmental, so ready to exclude, to condemn, to shut doors and hearts. I find it difficult enough to take care of the beams in my own eyes than pointing out the

splinters in the eye of my neighbor. It seems to me that the persons who received the greatest condemnation from Jesus were not the outcasts and sinners, but the religious folks so certain of their goodness and standing with God that they could look on disdain and even hatred at others who did not measure up to their standards, who were so quick to make themselves the gatekeepers of who was in and who was out. Maybe the most effective way to help others change is to seek God's help in changing ourselves, and to be grateful for the all-embracing grace that makes such change possible.

Guns for Christmas

I could not believe my ears. One of the myriad of presidential candidates said that what we needed was more guns. If students and everyone carried guns, there would be less violence.

WOW. How in the world could anyone believe such a thing? How could he honestly think that everyone carrying a gun would make our society safer? I'm afraid to go out already. If I knew everyone had a gun, I would have to stay home all the time, order everything home delivered by Wal Mart and do my sermons on YouTube. Can you see yourself before your congregation and all of them packing iron? Man, talking about pressure. One stinky sermon or saying anything that might upset anyone could result in becoming holey real fast.

And from listening to some of the rest of the candidates, I am surprised that I haven't heard any of them, yet, say that this might also solve the illegal immigration problem. How? Well, see an illegal immigrant – shot him/her or at least at them. Course, that begs the question of just how you tell whether someone is illegal or not. Maybe the answer would be, "Shoot first and ask questions later."

Having recently moved near D.C., I am interested in the fact that the Supreme Court has just taken up the issue of whether or not the District can continue to ban handguns. D.C. is already one of the most violent places in America. But I can hear the argument that some say this will decrease it because someone will be less likely to take a gun out if they know everyone else will have one. The only flaw in that is that anyone who wants to commit a crime with a gun is more likely not to just brandish it as a threat but to shot first. Course, I guess it might make a difference if everyone was holding guns cocked and ready all the time. That sounds like a pleasant society, doesn't it?

Maybe it's just me, but every time I pick up a newspaper or turn on the news I hear another account of someone, even children, getting shot or shooting someone else. For the life of me I can't believe our only solution to this would be to get more guns out there. God help us.

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