

“REAL LOVE!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Christmas Eve 2020

Tonight we celebrate the Lord who has come. Not to lord anything over us. But to love us. Really love us.

This world, beset by Covid-19 and other ills, can be bleak place, a harsh place, a dark place. Too often evil and meanness prosper. Cruel men, like King Herod of Biblical days, grab for themselves and gloat. With their swagger they act as if they will forever hold sway. It is easy to despair. Yet Jesus comes as Lord to show us that God is not finished with his Creation or with us. He does not countenance what is evil, wrong, and mean. Instead, God is determined to redeem and make good a world gone wrong--an earthly realm gone awry--not only because of the accidents of nature but also human selfishness and sin.

As God, preparing us for the coming of a messiah and savior, proclaimed through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel: “I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the crippled, and strengthen that which was sick.” (*Ezekiel 34:16*) That’s what tonight is all about. *Really* about.

Some philosophies just preach magical, wishful thinking. Other religions and faiths pride themselves as “metaphysical.” They keep talking abstractly about God and his doings. Yet the God whom we as Christians worship chose long ago in Bethlehem to give *real*, full-bodied expression to his love for us. *This*, congregation, is the meaning and significance of Jesus’ birth.

In Jesus, God made his love for us vital and real so that we might see it with our own eyes and through Christ’s subsequent ministry hear it with our own ears. Direct. Unmediated. Crystal clear. Resounding.

Born at Bethlehem, Jesus is not only God incarnate, but love incarnate. Because God’s essential nature is loving. Even God’s fiercest judgments against evil and greed are tempered by love and a desire to redeem and renew, rather than punish and destroy.

As we contemplate the significance and import of God’s incarnation into the world through Jesus Christ, perhaps it’s helpful to know that *carne*, the main syllable in those words *incarnate* and *incarnation* that we even find in our Christmas carols, is Latin for flesh or meat. Thus, when we talk or sing about *God incarnate* or *God’s incarnation in Christ* we’re talking and singing about *God enfleshed* and *God’s enfleshment*. Through God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, our Supreme Being not only becomes flesh and blood. His love does too. Ultimately, then, God’s love for us in Christ is not some wispy sort of thing. Literally and figuratively, with Jesus, through Jesus, it’s meaty. In other words, it has substance, depth and power.

Subsequently, throughout Jesus' life and ministry we see him as the true embodiment of God *and* love, come to earth. Against critics, cynics, naysayers, and self-serving people, Jesus boldly stands up for what is just and loving in the most beautiful and courageous way. Jesus's whole life, continuing all the way to Calvary's cross, makes love undeniably real. If we don't know what God's love is about, all we have to do is look to the example of Jesus as witnessed in page upon page of the four gospels. As God's children, we are called to contemplate and embrace Christ's example.

I personally cherish the words of the Apostle John in an epistle or letter he wrote to the early Christian church. John declares: "This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into world that we might live through him." John then adds: "This is love; not only that we loved God, but that God loves us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." "Dear friends," John finishes, "since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (1 John 4:9-11)

What the Apostle affirms for us is that, as men and women privileged to see God's love embodied in Jesus Christ from the days of Bethlehem onwards, we have responsibilities going forward.

First of all, how can we look upon God's awesome love for us in Jesus Christ and not be embarrassed and ashamed by our own sinful selfishness... Our callousness... Our shallowness... Particularly in the face of others' suffering and need all around us? Congregation, hardened hearts do not honor our loving incarnate God. Nor do they respect the original purposes for which God made us as men and women. Opening our lives to the loving, redeeming spirit of Christ, we need to battle as necessary against any and all sinful selfishness on our part. When we, in faithfulness to him, make our best efforts to battle and resist sin and selfishness, God will give us whatever extra boost we need to be sincerely and genuinely more loving--true to his own example.

Secondly, just as God shows his love for us in spite of our sins, we are called to love others in spite of their sins. Just as God forgive us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are asked to live with a forgiving spirit towards others. Love one another in these ways and more, God says, just as I have shown you my love through Jesus Christ!

In our present time and wider world no topic is more popular than love. In fact, the world is obsessed with love—as we discover everywhere we turn. Love, as in romance, sells countless magazine and endless books. The human quest for love is one of the great themes of theater, cinema, and television. It is one of the great lures of today's internet and social media with all their matchmaking sites. Certainly more than half the music we listen to is about the joys and sorrows of love. Remember what Beatle Paul McCartney said about composing "just another silly love song?"

Yet, however engaging, this love, which our world exalts, is not at all the same love proclaimed by God in Jesus' birth. Nor is it the deeper sort of love that God want to see shine through our own lives.

In Jesus, God loves us *unselfishly*, which he why he sent Jesus to us in the first place. God even loves us *self-sacrificially*, which is why his obedient son was willing to give up his life on the cross for us. In return for everything he does for us, all that God asks is that we lead our lives honestly, justly, and lovingly, respecting his original intentions for us so that we can have a good life now and a future life with him eternally. (*Exodus 20:3; Matthew 19:16-22; John 13:34-35*)

Congregation, amid the bleakness of this world, against the backdrop of all its harshness and darkness, God has shown us through Jesus born at Bethlehem that he still very much loves us and his creation and is committed to our redemption.

God's real love for us in Jesus Christ is... Unselfish. Ungrudging. Forgiving, Gracious. Embracing. Enduring. Sustaining.

In this season of Christmas may we show our commitment to our loving God by our own openness to the redeeming spirit of Christ and a renewed determination to more truly loving to those around us. Let's not be lazy in stretching ourselves to love more. Let's not be hesitant or afraid of the self-sacrifice that goes hand in hand with love. Let's be ready, wherever possible, to forgive.

May each of us strive to love even those folks who do not seem so lovable, whom in forgiving and loving we have nothing to gain, except perhaps God's appreciation and blessing and our own peace of heart and mind. Just as Jesus is the incarnation of God and love, may we seek to incarnate and embody the spirit of divine love in everyday life for this season and all seasons ahead. By this we will affirm our faith and devotion to Jesus, beautifully witnessing to an often troubled world that he is our Lord and this Lord is the Lord of love. **Amen.**