

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2017

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A man and a woman had been married for more than 60 years. They had shared everything. They had kept no secrets from each other except that the little old woman had a shoe box in the top of her closet that she had cautioned her husband never to open or ask her about.

For all of these years, he had never thought about the box, but one day the little old woman got very sick and the doctor said she would not recover. In trying to sort out their affairs, the little old man took down the shoe box and took it to his wife's bedside. She agreed that it was time that he should know what was in the box. When he opened it, he found two crocheted dolls and a stack of money totaling \$95,000. He asked her about the contents.

"When we were to be married," she said, "my grandmother told me the secret of a happy marriage was to never argue. She told me that if I ever got angry with you, I should just keep quiet and crochet a doll."

The little old man was so moved; he had to fight back tears. Only two precious dolls were in the box. She had only been angry with him two times in all those years of living and loving. He almost burst with happiness. "Honey," he said "that explains the doll, but what about all of this money? Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that?" she said. "That's the money I made from selling the dolls."

Ah, "love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage...." Isn't that how the old song pans out? Of course it's what came to mind on this Fourth Sunday of Advent when we pause to consider love in all its varied forms. Being this close to Christmas our focus is on love of God, love of the world, love of mother and child (poor Joseph - - he rarely gets into the picture), the love of Christ, the love of God in Christ, the loving power of the Spirit present at the birth of the Savior. This late in Advent we are about to explode into one big love fest and to recognize the origins of all the love we experience in life.

Many of our Christmas hymns speak about God's love or the love of Mary for her son, from the wonders of his love in "Joy to the World," to the angels who keep their watch of wondrous love in "O Little Town of Bethlehem," to love's pure light in "Silent Night." Nearly every carol includes the theme of love, even if they don't use the word itself, which is only fitting as we want the assurance of love especially at Christmastide when we seek to express it in our gift giving, our worship, our sharing, and our prayers for peace and harmony in a contentious world.

As has been my custom in these Advent homilies, I've taken us to the Top Ten Lists via the Internet to examine our weekly themes of peace, hope, and joy. In pausing to think about love, there are so many ways we can go, but I decided on the "Top Ten Things People Say they Love and Hate" (wherein it seemed clear that one was either for something or against it, no in-betweens.) Number one is going into outer space (or the thought of it). Number two is camping (you're either an outdoorsy type or not, apparently). Number three is vanilla ice cream (with so many flavors, why not be choosy?). Number four is Justin Bieber (I reserve the right to remain silent here). Number five is babies (yep, there are some folks that can't handle the crying,) and number six is large dogs (as the owner of a 85 lb. yellow lab lap dog, you know where I stand [or sit]). Number seven is rap music (I'm neutral on this one, though it's not my favorite). Number eight and nine are food related: bacon (really?) and marmite, an Australian yeast extract in funny little jars with yellow labels (I totally understand). And number ten is coffee.ⁱⁱ I have never met anyone who does not like coffee, but I'm in the positive consumers group, so my experience is limited. I could add my own to the list, starting with Brussels sprouts, mussels and oysters, heavy metal music, heights and cramped spaces on the one end, to cream and sugary desserts, travelling overseas, the beach anywhere, and a freshly made bed at a hot-weather resort on the other end. I can see folks making up their own lists in their minds as I'm speaking. Therefore, one understands how facile it is to love or hate other members of the human race when we can so easily have such strong feelings about more mundane things. Love comes naturally to us, we imagine. In reality, we really have to work at it, as there are many other emotions and "stuff" that gets in the way.

At this time of the year we are asked to place our love thoughts into the context of how God so loved the world that God took on human form in order to both understand what we go through as humans and to dare to get close enough to us for us to understand love in a new and unheard of way. That is why Christmas is known by both the names of The Feast of the Nativity, on the one hand, and The Feast of the Incarnation as well. We tend to dwell on the birth of the child portion while ignoring the theological reason that God becomes one with humanity by taking on human flesh. Do we see, do we understand the Incarnation as an act of God done because God loves us?

In seeking further to elucidate this for our prayerful consideration this morning, I sought clarity (my first mistake) from Wikipedia, which I like to use because usually it breaks subjects down to their lowest common denominator and makes them easy to understand. Here is what the first paragraph about the Incarnation said: "In Christian theology, the doctrine of the Incarnation holds that Jesus, the preexistent divine Logos (Koine Greek for 'Word') and the second hypostasis of the Trinity, God the Son and Son of the Father, taking on a human body and human nature, 'was made flesh' and conceived in the womb of Mary the *Theotokos* (Greek for 'God-bearer'; Latin: *Mater Dei*, lit. 'Mother of God'). The doctrine of the Incarnation, then,

entails that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, his two natures joined in hypostatic union.”ⁱⁱⁱ Now, wasn’t that helpful? Not! It would take about four years of theological instruction to unpack all that terminology and the discussions that brought this doctrine declared by the early church to fruition. Suffice it to say that the early church fathers (and I say “fathers,” as no “mothers” were allowed into the discussions) wanted us to know that the love of God was eminently stronger than any other love, and that it was realized as part of the Creative process of God taking on human form and giving up part of the Divine essence so that we would always know and feel that God is with us in and about all things. What could be more loving than constantly being in touch with us, constantly reassuring us, constantly lifting up our spirits? This is God’s loving gift at Christmas, becoming like one of us for us. This is love divine, all loves excelling.

I wondered if there were a song or a piece of poetry that examined this relationship that God has with us in the Incarnation. There is a 5c. Latin Christmas hymn called “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” which proclaims

Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be
He is alpha and omega, He the source, the ending He
Of the things that are, that have been
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!^{iv}

And there is a Lenten 3c. Latin contemplative chant often used at communion, “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” that proffers

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,

That the powers of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away.

At His feet the six wingèd seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
Alleluia, Alleluia
Alleluia, Lord Most High!^v

So these are Incarnation themes for the Christmas celebration we will hold tonight. Yet Christmas is not only about the love that God has for us; it is about the love that a mother has for her child. We explored this theme last week with the hymn, "Mary, Did You Know?" Today I'd like to share with you another hymn that speaks of the love Mary had for her newborn child. It's known as The Coventry Carol, and it is a 15c. song with lyrics that are sung to a sweet, flute-based tune:

Lullay, Thou tiny little Child
Bye-bye, lulle, lullay;
Lullay, Thou tiny little Child,
Bye-bye, lulle, lullay.

Oh sisters two, how may we do
To preserve this day?
This poor Childling for whom we sing
Bye-bye, lulle, lullay.

Herod, the King, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day
His soldiers in their strength and might,
All children young to slay.

Then woe is me, poor Child, for Thee,
And ever mourn and say,
For at thy parting nor say nor sing
Bye-bye, lulle, lullay.

And when the stars ingather do,
In their far venture stay,
Then smile as dreaming, Little One,
Bye-bye, lulle, lullay.^{vi}

Whatever Mary was thinking about or dreaming about, it is said she pondered everything in her heart, and kept all these things there throughout Jesus' challenging and eventful life in a way only mothers can.

Now I say all of this to you this morning in full awareness of the mythic elements that surround the whole Christmas story. I know that there are lots of fairy tale-like portions to the Christmas story. Many Christian theologians would be the first to tell you that there probably was no manger, there probably was no Joseph, no angels and shepherds. I get it -- it is a magical story full of make-believe moments. But as a storyteller and preacher who tries to find ways on a weekly basis to help folks understand difficult theological utterings, I am thankful for the metaphor and the allegory and the parables that allow me to retell the story or to explicate Scripture. Do I believe it all happened to Jesus as it was written? No. But I do believe in the living power of the Word, as told at Christmas time in the *Gospel of John* to make things happen and the ability for the Word to make all things new, even if they are just a bunch of a lullays and fa-la-la-las. I'm willing to use the songs and words of love to bring us closer to one another, as I believe is God's intention for us.

May we always have in mind the last verse of Joy to the World:

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://sfglobe.com/?id=3888>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thetoptens.com/things-people-either-love-or-hate/>

ⁱⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarnation_\(Christianity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarnation_(Christianity))

^{iv} http://christmas-songs.org/songs/of_the_fathers_love_begotten.html

^v <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/e/letallmf.htm>

^{vi} http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/lulle_lullay.htm