

Sermon Notes for 12/24/16 (Christmas Eve, Homily during service of Lessons & Carols)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: 1 John 4:7-16

Theme: A WORLD-CLASS DISPLAY OF LOVE FOR YOU

The Point: The Father's love for us and the world comes wrapped in a small but essential package on Christmas Day, the Child born to be our Savior.

Introduction: Lately, at our daughter's home in Florida, there was a lot of interest in a package that came in the mail recently. We worked out with our son a way to provide a gift that we hope will be very useful and enjoyable for our two grandsons, ages 8 and 6. This is a large box (maybe 3'x2'x2'), and its presence in the house has prompted many a guess from the boys as to what is contained inside. The boys FaceTimed with us this morning as they opened it, so I don't have to wonder what might show up from my sermon on Facebook within an hour of service time (or maybe even during service time). It was a basketball goal that they will be able to use in their backyard pool. (Tough, living in Florida, huh?) The main interest was generated due to the size of the box, regardless of other presents under the tree (which might prove more valuable or more interesting or more useful, in the long run).

Today we celebrate a gift that came to this world wrapped in a pretty small package. The little child born on Christmas Day to Mary and her almost-husband Joseph will not have a birth weight listed on His birth certificate. In fact, He will not even have a birth certificate. Maybe He will weigh in at 6 or 7 or 8 pounds, probably weighed at His birth even less than our tiny little dog. He certainly weighed less than that big gift under Raymond & Luke's tree. Just like any newborn child, so this One has needs that diligent parents will work to meet. He will need to eat in order to grow. He will need to have His messy diapers changed. He will need to be comforted when He cries. He will need to learn to talk and to walk and to read and to do all the things an infant grown to toddler grown to child grown to adult will need to learn.

One thing He will not learn from His parents, though. He will not learn to sin. He is born with a character that is not stained by the slightest spot of sin. For this is the very Son of God, the Rose of Sharon, the spotless Lamb, who will not give in to any of Satan's temptations over the course of His whole lifetime. He will endure them all, for that is the purpose for which He has come. He came to obey His Father's will perfectly, without exception, so that His perfection might be applied to you and me through trusting in His merits. That is why Joseph was told to name this Child Jesus (which means literally "God saves") because in Him God is in the process of saving the whole world from the penalty and punishment of sin. In Jesus, God's love became as real as real could be.

Because of His perfect life and His innocent suffering and dying, Jesus has come to bring us assurance of life now and life forever. We can have confidence in the promises that are brought to us in the wake of this Child's birth. Some of you have probably seen (either on the news or on Youtube) the touching account of a Santa Claus who held a dying child in his arms while the 5-year-old boy took his last breath. He had brought with him a PAW Patrol vehicle that was the little boy's last Christmas present wish. The boy asked, "Santa, can you help me?" When Santa said he would try, the boy asked how he would know when he got where he was going. The Santa replied, "When you get there, just tell them you're my number one elf, and they will let you in."

As much of a tear-jerker of a story as this may make, it is pretty sad, if that is all we have to offer a dying child or a dying world: "Tell them you're my number one elf?" Really! This won't cut it at heaven's door, any more than any other argument based on who we are or what we have done. The only thing that will cut it on that day is a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. What makes all the difference for us is that we have a Savior who has placed Himself between us and eternal destruction.

A world-class love has appeared for world-class sinners like you and me! Ahaz would not dare to ask a sign, so God Himself gave a sign, speaking through the prophet Isaiah: “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” That would be a stunning sign, unrepeatable in all the history of the world. God gave His own dear Son into human existence so that we could be set free from sin and death.

And since He has done that, we have the pleasure and privilege and the calling to love our neighbor as ourselves. Here is how John expressed that in today’s Epistle lesson: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” There is the crux of the matter: If God has shown that sort of love, we are called to do the same toward those around us.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, “Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.” Lewis has hit on something very important. Even when we do not “feel” loving toward another person, we can still determine to act in that person’s behalf, for their welfare. God has done that for us, showing us a world-class love though we certainly did not deserve it.

Newspaper columnist and minister George Crane tells of a wife who came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. “I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me.” Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan. “Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you’ve convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you’re getting a divorce. That will really hurt him.” With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, “Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!” And she did it with enthusiasm. Acting “as if.” For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing. When she didn’t return, Crane called. “Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?” “Divorce?” she exclaimed. “Never! I discovered I really do love him.” Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. The ability to love is established not so much by fervent promise as by often-repeated deeds. (J. Allan Petersen)

Our Lord Jesus loved us, not just with words, but with actions and in truth. And that is the sort of love that He engenders within the hearts of His followers.

Conclusion: During the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sentenced a soldier to be shot for his crimes. The execution was to take place at the ringing of the evening curfew bell. However, the bell did not sound. The soldier’s fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the great clapper of the bell to prevent it from striking. When she was summoned by Cromwell to account for her actions, she wept as she showed him her bruised and bleeding hands. Cromwell’s heart was touched and he said, “Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!” (*Our Daily Bread*) The Father’s love for us and the world comes wrapped in a small but essential package on Christmas Day, the Child born to be our Savior. He has seen to it that the curse of death will not pass onto us – not just by saying so, but by His willing suffering and death on our behalf. There at Calvary we receive God’s greatest gift ever. And because we have received this priceless Gift, we can now enjoy the rare and blessed privilege of passing on that love to others, in the name and for the sake of Jesus. AMEN!