

Thursday, December 24, 2020 – Christmas Eve

“Love Reflected”

1 John 4: 7-16

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

You’ve been indoctrinated. So have I. I’m not talking about good indoctrination – taking in the teachings of Scripture. I’m talking about secular Christmas indoctrination on having “The Christmas spirit.” But let me explain further, I’m not talking about Ebenezer Scrooge being visited by spirits on Christmas Eve. You know what I mean. We’ve been taught by millions of movies and songs – about Santa Claus and Elf on the Shelf snitching on your naughtiness or niceness, about snowfall, about cozy fireplaces, about trees and wreaths and mistletoe, and smells, spices and foods that usually only come around once a year. Red and green and white and twinkling lights, bells and bows, Christmas music marathons on the radio and way, way too much sugar.

But central to the “spirit of Christmas” is love. Even though we give presents, we’re told presents aren’t really what Christmas is all about. Christmas is all about being with those you’re close to, right? Your family, your friends. It’s about putting aside differences and loving each other.

In our class, Christmas for Americans 101, we did learn something that was right – Christmas is all about love – but not the love from Christmas for Americans 101. If we expect to be able to love simply because it’s Christmas-time... well I think that’s pretty naïve. What is the foundation then? Where do we go for this spirit of love?

The first thing to note is that if we’re going to experience love and loving in a way that is at all worthwhile, the source of that love comes from outside ourselves. The root of love isn’t in us – it’s in God. Amazingly, you can pass, with honors, from the class “Christmas for Americans 101” and not hear a whole lot about God and His love. Don’t get me wrong, it’s there... though usually you have to look for Jesus and manger scenes and God’s love in Christmas the way you look for Waldo in a crowd. No, there

is nothing real, nothing of substance, nothing enduring in the “Christmas spirit,” whatever that means, if we aren’t talking about God’s love that comes to us in Jesus. John can’t make what this love is much more clear – he writes, “This is how God showed us His love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” The love of God is a selfless, a sacrificial love. He sacrificed His own Son, who was perfect, who could carry our guilt and shame on His shoulders so that instead of punishment, we could receive God’s love.

That’s what this night is all about – God showing His love through His Son. God’s love reflects off of us like light off a mirror so that when other people relate to us, they get God’s love. I don’t know about you – that sounds a way better reason to love than because you have the “Christmas spirit” and snow is falling and you’re wearing an ugly sweater. Real love is only possible by reflecting the love God first gave us in Jesus.

Does that sound real? What I’m claiming is that God’s love for us informs, in a very real way, how our relationships with the people in our lives actually work. Has that always been true for you?

Because the fact is, at this time of year when we talk so often and so clearly about God’s sending His love in Jesus is also the time of year people are most stressed, when families most often fight, when relationships, souring for months or years on end crack, when suicide rates climb. This year it coincides with many families being forced to abandon their traditional Christmas plans, heaping grief upon grief. It forces us to ask the question – does John’s claim stand up? If God’s love shown in Jesus is really reflecting off of us makes a difference in the lives of people around us... then why is it so hard to see this love at work sometimes? Is all this stuff about Jesus and God’s love just as much fluff as overtures about being in the Christmas spirit?

This is where the rubber hits the road folks – does Jesus make any difference? Does Christmas matter for me today, for my relationships, for the people that I love?

I think, when God's love is working in our hearts, we want to see His love make a difference in our lives. If Jesus is truly at the center of what we're about, if our relationships are built on Him, that should make a difference in how we interact with each other. If you've ever thought that, you've probably also been disillusioned at some point, perhaps now – that the love isn't quite this perfect reflection of God's love. Some will start to doubt God's ability to really make a difference in how we love each other. Some will be overwhelmed with guilt or shame, taking on responsibility because God's love is being reflected poorly in themselves. Some will be angry, because the people they're trying to love are just so... unloving and ungrateful. And still others of us will question whether this perfect love shown in Jesus can make any real difference among sinful people. It's great that God loves us that way, but can we carry the message further, like John, who says, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another?" All too often, Christian love reflects too dimly.

It is true – the love God gives us doesn't reflect perfectly off of us. Our mirrors are streaky and tarnished and the bright light of God's love reflects less off us than the light He gave. That's a product of our sin. St. Paul talks about this. In His great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, he gives this wonderful list of what full and perfect love, God's love in Jesus, is – patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't boast, isn't proud, isn't rude or selfish, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. Love does not fail.

No, love does not fail, no matter how dimly we reflect it. Paul then says, "Now, we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then (at the time of Jesus' return), we shall see face to face."

Yes. The only source of meaningful love that comes from us, comes from God. True, it is sometimes reflected dimly, tarnished by our sin, by our limitations. Do you know how big God's love is? In a world where love can fall so short, we turn back to God's purest and biggest act of love – sending His Son Jesus – sending Him as a sacrifice. The love we celebrate tonight of a child born in Bethlehem is our comfort when God's light reflects too dimly from us, or to us from others. So our grief, as well as our

sin gets filtered through the light of Christ. We repent of our own sin and we forgive the sin of others.

We see the eternal God share in our grief and suffering, from the manger all the way to the cross.

Whenever you see your own repentance or yourself forgiving, God's love given through Jesus is at work.

That love is a reflection of your eternal life – the love you reflect is love that will go on between us until the return of our Lord and be perfected on that day. It is never, I repeat never a waste of time to have tried to love, worked at loving or to ask God's help for the love of Christ to permeate all aspects of the way that you love people today. Merry Christmas, as God shines His love on you in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.