

Christmas©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Merry Christmas to you. It isn't often that Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, our usual day of worship. Most years Christmas Eve is when congregations hold special services to recognize and honor this preeminent Christian holiday. Christmas Eve services are often some of the best attended services of the year. Christmas Day, on the other hand, typically finds children waking and rushing to the Christmas tree to see all of the presents waiting for them there. Christmas Day is a time when family members gather, a day when people tend to want to be "home." With these awarenesses at the front of my mind I want to say welcome to you all and thank you for coming this morning. It is my hope that this worship service will contribute to making this a Merry Christmas for each of you.

Christmas, as we heard in our Story for All Ages, celebrates the birth of a baby, a very special baby. I say that knowing that every baby is a very special baby to those who know and love that child. Christmas commemorates the birth of one particular special baby. A baby named Jesus who was born more than two thousand years ago. As the story is told, he was born in a manger since there was no room in the inn. The story of his birth, including how it came to occur in the manger, as well as many other happenings surrounding it, are found in two of the Gospels, Matthew and Mark. As is typical in the Gospels, the details related to Jesus' birth and life aren't identical. Over the centuries the stories in these two Gospels regarding his birth have been intermixed and entwined into a story that most people in this country are at least generally familiar with.

Most Christmas Eve services focus on the story of Jesus' birth and its significance. Today, on Christmas Day, I would like us to not only think about his birth, but his life and his teachings. For what is it that makes his birth and Christmas worthy of the attention it receives if it isn't what Jesus did and taught in the course of his life? What the Gospels tell us about his life and his message seem to me to be as important today as they were during the time he lived.

Jesus was born during a time when the land of his people was ruled by a distant King—King Herod we are told. Throughout his life, his people were at the mercy of occupying forces and governing bodies that were, at the least, unresponsive to the needs of the people. At their worst, the occupying forces and governing bodies were hostile, oppressive and abusive to him and his people. As we pay attention to the news today it is clear that situations such as what Jesus and his people lived through continue to be present in our world today. Jesus didn't agree with many of the values of those in positions of political power.

And it wasn't just the occupying forces and the governing bodies that Jesus had issues with. He also had concerns about what he saw happening within his religious tradition. He had significant differences of opinion with the religious leaders and teachers of the faith tradition of his family and his people. I would imagine that many, if not all of us, have at times had differences of opinion with those who govern our land or

those who are religious leaders or teachers. Some of us may even voice those concerns from time to time. But in Jesus' time, speaking out against the establishment, whether the government or the religious establishment, could have very dire consequences. At the current time in this country, speaking out against the governmental or religious establishment isn't likely to garner the types of dire consequences that Jesus witnessed and experienced. Yet in spite of what he knew could happen, Jesus spoke out and acted against what he deemed to be counter to the foundation of his religious beliefs.

So let's consider for a moment what Jesus believed was at the very foundation of his religion. In the Book of Mark, it is written that when a religious leader asked him which of the commandments was the first above all others Jesus did as he often did. He didn't stay within the confines that were set for him. Instead he went beyond them. He replied that there were two commandments that were at the top not just one. These were to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, **and** to love your neighbor as yourself. He then went even further beyond the bounds that had been set by stating "There is no other commandment greater than these." And in another of the Gospels, the Book of John, Jesus speaks to his disciples saying, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

For Jesus, love was the basis of his religion and the essence of his life. Love, above all else, even life itself, was what mattered. In the birth of the baby Jesus then, we are told that love, pure, unadulterated and eternal love, becomes incarnate. That type of love is worthy of the attention that Christmas receives. As I consider what I have seen and heard in the weeks leading up to this special day I wonder if our attention is focused primarily on the message of love that Jesus taught and lived. It seems to me that for many people in our culture the focus tends to stray to other things. I wonder what Christmas might look like if we were willing and able to put love above all else—to have love guide and direct us in all we do.

As I try to imagine what this might look like my mind becomes flooded with images. First, I see store parking lots with plenty of empty parking spaces. Wouldn't that be amazing? But I see even more amazing things than that. Around those parking lots I notice that there are no homeless people holding cardboard signs at the entrance or exit. Instead, I see the folks who have been living on the streets being provided a place to live and the food they need not only to survive but to flourish. I imagine those who are incarcerated being able to spend time with their families and loved ones. I see those who are considered "other" such as the undocumented immigrant or the refugee whose religion isn't Christian being welcomed in our land. I see women receiving pay equal to their male co-workers. And I see towns and cities across our country filled with neighborhoods where people of all colors and ancestral background live and share together comfortably as if anything else would seem odd or even abnormal. As I said, when I try to think about what Christmas might look like if we were willing and able to put love above all else my mind gets flooded with images. I want to invite you now, if you would, to share what images come to your mind when you think of how Christmas might be, could be, if love was the guiding force in our lives. If you have an image you

would like to share I would ask you to raise your hand. When I acknowledge you I would encourage you to stand and share what came to your mind. (Time of sharing)

Thank you all for sharing. I know there are many other images that could have been spoken. As I am sure it is clear to all of us, we have not yet arrived at the place that love has the capacity to take us. But let us remember Jesus and the time he lived in. The world then had a long way to go to embody and live out the love that he was teaching about and bringing into the world. So today, on Christmas, I invite all of us to not only imagine a world where love is our guide but to seek to demonstrate through our lives what love looks like. And I would encourage us to follow the example Jesus set as he spoke to those in power about what really matters in life.

As I say this I am reminded of a song by John Lennon titled "Imagine." Many of you are likely familiar with the lyrics. Here is part of one verse.

Imagine all the people, living life in peace, you
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you will join us
And the world will be as one.

It seems to me that if Jesus had his way such that love would guide our way, the world truly would be as one. So on this Christmas morn let us remember and honor what made that babe, born those many years ago, so very special. Let us go forth from this place with love in our hearts. And let us seek to make this day and the next and the next more like what we have imagined Christmas would look like if love could guide the way.

May it be so.