

December 9, 2018

The Gifts of Christmas

*The Gift of Love*

Luke 2:15-20

**Opening words:** Gift giving at Christmas has become big business in America. The numbers are staggering, and the numbers keep growing. According to the National Retail Federation, the average American will spend approximately \$700 on Christmas gifts and goodies this year. That means as a country we will spend a total of \$465 billion. Yet, lost in the excitement of gift giving is the real meaning of Christmas. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you know the truth. Christmas is not just about family and friends. It is not just about peace and goodwill. It is not just the "holiday season". It is Christmas, the time we remember the greatest gift we will ever receive, Jesus. Christmas truly is a Christian holiday.

This is sermon number two in my five-part advent sermon series, *The Gifts of Christmas*. We are looking at the gifts God has given to us in Christ. God's gifts will not go out of style or break. They are eternal, spiritual gifts that come to true believers. We are reminded of them annually, as we light the Advent candles. We began last week by looking at the gift of hope. Today, we look at love. Our scripture reading for today is Luke 2:15-20. Let me call this message *The Gift of Love*.

**Luke 2:15-20** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

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David Wilkerson (1931-2011) was an American Christian evangelical, best known for his book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. He once said, "*Love is not only something you feel, it is something you do.*" I am not sure how you can disagree with that quote. If you want to find the person who loves you the most in this world, then look for the person who has sacrificed the most for you. If you find some truth in that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Luke. The story is familiar. There is much you already know. We visit these sacred words annually. Just prior to our reading, Jesus is born. You know Jesus's parents. His biological mother was Mary. His biological father was God. His earthly father was Joseph, the carpenter. You know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the town of David. Bethlehem means "The House of Bread."

You know why the holy family was in Bethlehem. It was Joseph's hometown. He was required to return to be counted in the national census. You know where Jesus was born - in a barn, where Mary placed her firstborn in a feeding trough. You know a great deal about the birth of Jesus, but it was still a secret to the shepherd's world. That is what makes our scripture reading so amazing.

According to the text, the shepherds were at work, watching the sheep. The text says, they were not just working an eight-hour shift. The text says that they were living with the animals. The sheep are a big part of the story. There are two things you need to know about them. First, the sheep were valuable. They were reserved for temple sacrifice, so they had to be flawless. Second, the shepherds did not own the sheep; they were hired to protect the sheep against thieves and predatory animals. This is the only thing you need to know about the shepherds: They were second-class citizens. In their society, they were low on the social ladder. Through the eyes of the religious purist, the shepherds were despised, because they couldn't follow the letter of the law, and they were dispensable. The sheep, on the other hand, were revered and indispensable. It sounds crazy, but it is true. For the shepherds, the day began like any other day, yet it would be a day the shepherds would never forget.

Without warning, an angel suddenly appears. Remember, in the Bible, angels are not protectors, they are messengers. The unnamed angelic messenger encourages them to fight back against their natural response of fear. This is going to be a red-letter day in their lives. The announcement they are about to hear will not just be remembered by them and their generation. The announcement will be remembered by the generations to come. In the town of David, Bethlehem, the long-awaited Messiah has been born. He didn't enter this world surrounded by the aristocrats of their society. He entered this world surrounded by people like them and like us, commoners. The fact that they received such an announcement was incredible, but what is truly miraculous is what happens next. They are invited to go and see the newborn with their own eyes. *You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.* Leaving the valuable sheep unprotected or under-protected, they go to visit the baby. Their invitation illustrates a simple divine truth. God doesn't just love the rich or the poor, God loves everyone! God even loves you! If you are thankful God loves you, say, "**Amen!**" Never underestimate the power of love. The problem is, love is a complex thing.

In the English language, we have one word for love: "love". It is a generic term and we use it in all kinds of relationships. We use the same word to express our feeling for our spouse, mother, family pet, country, favorite sports team and candy bar. We say we love them all. We do not think about it, because we have grown up using the word "love" in those ways. The English language is unique in that way. In other languages, they have different words to express different kinds of love. For example, in Biblical Greek, the language the New Testament was written in originally, there are three different words to express the different kinds of love.

Here are the three words for love in Biblical Greek:

- "Eros"** – Erotic love
- "Phila"** – Brotherly love
- "Agape"** – Unconditional, universal love

That may be the sum of what I remember from my seminary Greek classes. Love is complex. However, there is more.

Psychologists tell us love is not just complex, they also say love is important. They say, love fills in the cracks of your life. Love keep us moving forward, and love brings the best out in us. Here is another list, ten reasons psychologists say love is important. This list came from Carly Sprindel. She is a professional matchmaker and dating expert. (I guess that makes her a love expert.)

1. Love makes you feel invincible
2. Love inspires you
3. Love makes you happy
4. Love helps you eliminate your fears
5. Love brings out the best of you
6. Love helps you forget your problems
7. Love challenges your priorities
8. Love is selfless
9. Love gives you hope
10. Love helps us feel connected

I know that list is about romantic love, but I cannot disagree with it. Love is an amazing thing. Never underestimate the power of love. Each one of us needs love and we need to be told we are loved. If you can agree with that, say, **"Amen!"** With all the people who were in the world on that night, God announced the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to commoners. Why did God announce the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds? There is only one answer. The reason is, God loved the shepherds, because God loves everyone.

In 2011, Kim Kardashian (born 1980) and Kris Humphries (born 1985) proclaimed their love. Kris was an NBA player. Kim is a reality star, who does things to stay in the headlines. They did not have a simple private ceremony. They proclaimed their love for all the world to see. It was a two-day E-Special called "Kim's Fairytale Wedding". Their wedding cost \$10 million. Do you remember how long Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries' marriage lasted? It lasted 72 days. Many say, they used the sacred institution of marriage as a massive publicity stunt. They may be right. Today, Kris Humphries has disappeared, and Kim Kardashian is married to Kanye West. It is her third marriage. Can I ask you a question? Do you consider Kim Kardashian a love expert? Or, do you consider my friend John a love expert? This is his story:

John and his wife, Mary, have been married for over sixty years. There is nothing flashy about them. They are just good people, who have worked hard. Together, they raised a family and dreamed of a carefree retirement. One day John noticed Mary was starting

to forget things. At first, it was little things, like the car keys and where she parked at the grocery store. Then, she began to forget bigger things, like where she lives and her grandchildren's names. One day, she didn't recognize John. On a very sad day, the family moved her out of the long-time family home to a Memory Care Unit in a local facility. John visits Mary every day, but she doesn't know him. Did you hear what I said? John visits a woman every day who doesn't know who he is. Some have asked, why does he visit her? I know why. He visits her for one reason: John loves Mary. She is the love of his life. Let me ask you the question again. Do you consider Kim Kardashian a love expert? Do you consider my friend John a love expert? If you know the answer, say, "**Amen!**" With that in mind, someone once asked me this question:

In the Christian faith, which is more important, Christmas or Easter? It is an excellent question. They are both holy days on the liturgical calendar. In many ways, they stand side by side. You can't celebrate one without the other.

Christmas is when we celebrate the incarnation of God. In other words, we are awed by the fact God became one of us. It has been said, it is beyond all human understanding. Everyone knows the scene, and what is more important, everyone loves the scene. For this reason, everyone has a nativity set in their home. There is the baby Jesus surrounded by his parents, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds and the animals. Everyone loves Christmas because everyone loves a baby. Believers love Christmas, because we understand the true meaning of the holiday. No one can tell me Christmas isn't important. Yet, no one can tell me Easter isn't important.

Easter is equally important. You know the story. The baby Jesus did what all babies do. He grew up, but unlike us, he never committed a single sin. That made him the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. The drama played out during the Passover. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a Sunday in front of a big crowd. As the week went on, the crowd got smaller. By Friday, the crowd was gone; it was just a handful. They were the witnesses of a painful scene. With a sinner on his right and a sinner on his left, Jesus was crucified. It was a Roman form of torture and death. They say, Jesus drowned in his own body fluids. It was an ugly death. Yet, on that Sunday morning, the great discovery was made. Miraculously, Jesus came back to life. I have never been able to explain the resurrection, because I can't explain a miracle. Yet, that miracle is the foundation of our faith. No one can tell me Easter isn't important.

It has been several years since someone asked me the question, which is more important, Christmas or Easter? They are separate events. Both are important and both are major events in God's plan of salvation for the world. I don't know how to answer that question. However, I do know this: If you want to discover the person who loves you the most in this world, then look for the person who has sacrificed the most for you. If you want to discover the depth of God's love, go to the cross. It is not pretty, but it is revealing. David Wilkerson wasn't wrong. Do you remember his words? He once said, "*Love is not only something you feel, it is something you do.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"