

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE | DECEMBER 24, 2020

ISAIAH 62:6-12 | PSALM 97 | TITUS 3:4-7 | LUKE 2:1-20

Last summer, the PBS Newshour aired a story about the juvenile criminal justice system in Dallas.¹ Part of the story focused on Creative Solutions, a summer arts program that provides arts enrichment and education to youth who are on probation. Much of the story focused on the great teaching that happens in their workshops, the skills their students develop and take into their communities, and the positive effects the program has on recidivism. It seemed like a feel-good human-interest story.

But at the very end of the segment, the president of the camp mentioned a conversation with a student that he thinks about a lot. One his former campers called him up and was talking about all the ways the camp had given him a new start in life. But then the student added, “Why did I have to go to jail before I got [an opportunity] that would change my life?”

We love a redemption story. We love a story of comebacks and second chances and deliverance. The prodigal daughters who return home after their sojourns in a foreign land. The Samaritans who break the cycle of distrust. The Rahabs who help us in our moment of weakness. The ones we find it easiest to love are the ones who make us feel good about ourselves, the ones who don’t ask too much of us, the ones we think are deserving of charity. We love what’s lovable.

And that’s why that student’s question hits so hard. Because being loved made him realize how indifferent people had been to him. When he was a student in an underfunded school, when he drank out of lead pipes, when he couldn’t afford to go to college, no one thought much of it. It was just the way the world worked. But when people saw him as sympathetic, when they saw he had talent, when he could play a bit part in their redemption story, suddenly people took an interest. He had access to all kinds of resources he’d never had access to before. Why did something bad have to happen to me for something good to happen to me?

An arts camp in Dallas probably seems far afield from a stable in Bethlehem, but it’s really not. Because both are stories about how, who, and why we love. We often say that the mystery of Christmas is how God became human. And, to be sure, that’s fairly complicated. But the deeper mystery of Christmas is that God loves people who can’t always accept or reciprocate or appreciate that love. The mystery of Christmas is that God doesn’t just love what’s lovable.

Titus puts it this way. That in the child of Jesus, the “loving-kindness” of God has appeared among us in the flesh. And it has arrived “not because of works of righteousness we had done, but according to [God’s] mercy.” In other words, God loves us not because we are especially faithful or pious or impressive or deserving of that love. The love of God isn’t something that we achieve for ourselves or something that we need to cajole from God by being pleasant. God takes an interest in us even when we aren’t particular worthy of consideration. Like shepherds watching their flocks by night, the love of God finds us before we start looking for it.

My hunch is that, on some level, many of us don’t think we’re deserving of love. We feel inadequacy or shame or guilt. Maybe we think that if other people really knew us the way we know ourselves, they wouldn’t like us quite as much. We spend our lives looking for love and recognition, but when we find it after all our searching and longing, we can still find it so hard to believe. We find the love of others so incomprehensible that we make them give us an explanation because we feel like we haven’t done enough to deserve it or, even worse, we make them prove it to us again and again. Love might be a gift, but sometimes gifts can be difficult to accept.

¹ “In Dallas, How Art and Culinary Skills Are Helping Juvenile Offenders Stay out of Jail,” PBS NewsHour, July 30, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/in-dallas-how-art-and-culinary-skills-are-helping-juvenile-offenders-stay-out-of-jail>.

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And yet. Here this night the love of God finds us with no pretense, no warning, and no justification. It offers itself freely to us not because we are such worthy companions, but simply because God desires to be near us. God loves us anyway.

And that changes everything for us. The story we hear this night is not just the story of Jesus's birth, but the story of our own new beginning. Because to be "heirs to the hope of eternal life," as Titus puts it, is to be co-lovers of God's creation. To love like God loves. Not to simply love what is lovable, to love what is nice, to love what makes us feel good, but to love what is difficult, to love what is challenging, to love what is easier to ignore. Because Christ has inhabited all of human life, there is no one who we can write off as unworthy of consideration, of dignity, and of recognition. To put it very simply, everyone we encounter is someone whose company and presence God desires.

And Lord knows we need that sort of love. If there is something that our homes, our nation, and our world needs this Christmas, it is the ability to love other people for something more than what we think they can provide for us or how they can make us feel. In short, we need the ability to love others for who they are in relation to God before who they can be in relation to us.

And that's exactly what Christmas gives us. For, as one of our Christmas hymns puts it, "Love has come and never will leave us! Love is life everlasting and free. Love is Jesus within and among us. Love is the peace our hearts are seeking."

That's the gift. A love that can come without merit. A love that can be given without conditions. And a love grounded not in our self-interested perceptions of others but in the steadfast loving-kindness of God. That's the mystery and miracle of Christmas.

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