

DOESN'T CHRISTMAS JUST LOVE YOU!
I John 4:9-12

Hardly a day goes by this time of year when I don't run into somebody—usually a Mozelle Geisel type—you know, the permanently perky—who say **“Don't you just love Christmas!”** And usually I do—though admittedly, it's easier at some times than others—but for the most part, I really do love Christmas.

I got to thinking about that phrase this week—this being the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Love Sunday—and it occurred to me that maybe we need to change that phrase around a bit, to something more like this: **DOESN'T CHRISTMAS JUST LOVE YOU!**

Christmas is about hope, peace, and joy, to be sure. But those who've come before us in the faith placed the emphasis on love on the last Sunday before Christmas Day—and the reason for this, I would suppose, is because they felt that LOVE deserved the spot closest to the day itself—that LOVE, more than any other quality of Christian living is what Christmas is all about.

Maybe we don't think of our text for today as a Christmas passage, yet the more I consider it, the more I realize that although it doesn't speak about the “hows” of Christmas—no angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus, or anything else we associate with HOW the birth of Jesus happened—this passage has everything to do with WHY it happened.

And the why--above anything else that could be said here--the why of Christmas is love. This is the message you and I most need to receive from this Holy Season—that we are loved.

In fact, I don't think we can ever love this season as we should unless and until we understand the central Christmas message of how very much we ARE loved. Good friends, DOESN'T CHRISTMAS JUST LOVE YOU?!?

I invite you to listen now to one of many places in Scripture where God seeks to make this message clear--**I John 4:9-12:**

9 This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has

ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.

Have you given much thought to what you might get for Christmas this year? Some of you probably haven't, but there are others among us that have hardly thought of anything else!

Either way, I invite all of us to think for a few moments about our



Christmas gifts.

What makes for a really great gift in your book? What do you want that box sitting under the tree to look like—big or small? Heavy or light? Or maybe you have in mind something that won't fit under the tree at all! What would make for the perfect gift for you?

Now take a moment and think about God's Christmas gift to all of us, the one John describes with these words: **"This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him."** How would you describe God's gift of His Son, Jesus Christ?

Well, I've asked a few young friends to help me with this by bringing some gifts with them this morning--gifts which might point us in some way to the significance of God's gift of His Son.

1. A PRACTICAL GIFT—Underwear! Don't you just love it!

Have you ever thought about what a practical gift God gave us when He sent us His Son? Jesus taught us how to live—what could be more practical--that's surely something we can all use! Right?

He taught us that **it's more blessed to give than receive**—and we're so much happier when we remember this and practice it. He told us that holding grudges only keeps us in bondage—that **it's far better to forgive**—and don't worry about how many times!

When we receive the gift of Jesus into our lives, then lots of gifts we already have get used in brand new ways. **Our eyes**, for instance, begin to see

people the way Jesus sees them—the lonely, the lost, the poor—and when we see them as Jesus does, our hearts begin to care.

Our ears hear the cries of the hurting, and **our hands** find ways to respond to the needs of those about us. “Let me give you a hand” takes on a new and very practical meaning when we realize that our hands have now become Christ’s hands.

We could say the same about **our feet**, and **our lips**—walking the walk, AND talking the talk. Centuries ago, a man named Martin Luther, the great reformer for whom the Lutheran church is named, made this rather keen observation:

“If I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherd to see the Lord lying in the manger!”

Yes, you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at the time, you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem.

Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor you do to the Lord Christ Himself.”
(Martin Luther)

I am proud, friends, to be the Pastor of a people who understand the practical dimensions of the Christian Gospel. We’re **“underwear people”—and coats and socks, collards and cornbread people, too**—finding practical ways to make the love of Christ known.

Let’s have another gift now:

2. AN EXTRAVAGANT GIFT—(carving, the Prophet—Keith & Pat) Who does that look like? ...carved by a friend, named Keith—been through some tough times—our church in Roanoke, VA, took them in and cared for them and helped them heal. He had lost this job, had some time on his hand, so he took up carving as a hobby—good at it!

He called this carving “the Prophet.” It was the first one he ever carved, and he gave it to me for Christmas, 1982. I was very touched by this gift—he worked for hours carving it. It was a part of himself that he was giving to me. This is what made it feel so extravagant.

Now listen as the Apostle John describes God’s gift to us: **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (I John 4:10)**

That's extravagance, friends—the extravagance of God's love. God knew what it would take, the price that would need to be paid, for us to have our sins forgiven and our death-penalties removed.

So God sent us the most extravagant and personal gift of all. He gave us His Son—His only Begotten. And the card read, "This is how much I love you." Such extravagance--thank you, God!

And what do we offer in return? Well, listen to how Helen Steiner Rice expresses this in one of her poems:

**And this priceless gift of Christmas / Is within the reach of all.
The rich, the poor, the young and old / The greatest & the small.
So take His priceless Gift of Love / Reach out and you receive,
And the only payment that God asks / Is just that you believe.
Helen Steiner Rice**

"For...whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." By faith, we receive from our Heavenly Father the most extravagant gift of all!

3. A LIFE-CHANGING GIFT (Check for a million dollars—this will change my life—no more worries about Katie's tuition, or the sagging stock market. But wait a minute, this isn't signed---VOID!

Well, the real point I'm trying to make is that a gift of a million dollars is not nearly as life-changing as the gift of love. I hope you like this story as much as I do:

A family was driving for several hours on Christmas Day in order to get home for Christmas. They stopped at **a little restaurant** (PHOTO) for lunch. The place was nearly empty, except for an old fellow that most people would call "a bum." His clothes were tattered, he didn't look very clean, and he was missing several teeth.



The family's son, Erick, who had just turned one year old, saw the old man, the only other person in the diner, and began waving and smiling and saying "Hi." The old man started waving back. "Hi, there, baby," he said. "I see ya', buster—hi there."

The food came, but Erick was focused on the old man seated by the door. "Do you know patty cake--atta' boy! How about peek-a-boo? Look, look, he knows peek-a-boo," the man said as mom tried to get Erick to ignore him and eat.

Mom and Dad were both getting increasingly uncomfortable with this, but they didn't want to cause a scene—they did feel for him. They finished their meal, scooped up Erick, and tried to leave. But the only way out was to walk right past the old man.

When they did so, Erick reached out for him, obviously wanting him to take him. He was lunging toward his new friend. The mom turned and found herself eye to eye, and unfortunately because of the smell, nose to nose, with the old man. She was trying her best, but she could hardly hold on to Erick.

"Lady," he said cautiously, "would you let me hold your baby?" She had little choice as Erick jumped into the old man's arms and buried his head into his ragged shoulder. Mom's eyes got misty when she saw the tears in the old man's eyes as he embraced her child and gently patted his back.

After just a moment, the old man looked at Erick's mom and said, "You take real good care of this baby." "I will," she said. Then the old man pried Erick from his shoulder and placed him carefully back into the arms of his mother.

As he did so, he said, "God bless you, Ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." Everyone present understood that this baby had communicated something of God's love to the old man. Mom and dad felt it too. They were all blessed by this tender Christmas moment.

God's love changes us--our moments, our days, our lives, our eternity. At Christmastime, we celebrate the birth of a baby who came to fill our hearts with the wonder of God's love.

And, yes, we know there's much more to the story of Jesus than his birth. But what a beautiful way the Gospel begins. And how the birth of this baby, as we embrace Him again at Christmas, makes us feel so loved—so blessed by His love--that He changes our lives forever.

So I invite you to embrace Jesus Christ—for the first time, if you never have--or if you're already a believer, then in deeper and more personal ways than ever before—embrace the Savior who loves you so.

Above all the other gifts you may receive this Christmas, reach out and take hold of this gift—God's gift to you—embrace Christ, cherish Christ, and allow Him to fill your life with His love!