

## Advent Calendar: Love Sunday, 12/18/22

Last week, we remembered that the difficulties and disappointments of life can coexist with the joy of Christ. Without the joy of Christ in our hearts, we're hostage to the ups and downs of the circumstances surrounding our days.

Today we ponder what it means to love. I have a feeling that love is something that we tend to overcomplicate. Our next reading reminds us that the Kingdom of God isn't characterized by complex theological constructs, but with simple sincerity. I'm reading from the Gospel of Luke in the eighteenth chapter, beginning with verse 15, in The Message paraphrase. [{Read Luke 18:16-17, MSG}](#)

The kind of love that describes the real meaning of Christmas is different than so many other views of love expressed in our world. It's a love that is uniquely given by God and expressed by God's people. Surprisingly, we can see glimpses of Godly love in the Christmas films we watch. It was Christmas love that led Rudolph's father to venture into the snowstorm to find him, only to be captured by the abominable snow monster. It was Christmas love that led George Bailey's brother to fly home in *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was Christmas love that led little Cindy Lou Who to let the Grinch carve the roast beast.

Christmas love can even be found in the movie *Elf*. After crawling into Santa's bag of toys during Santa's visit to an orphanage, Buddy the elf discovers that he is actually a human who was raised by elves at the North Pole. The humor and joy of *Elf* comes from the nonstop contrast between Buddy's attitudes and actions as an elf, and the gritty realities of living in New York City. For example, based on his experiences in Santa's Workshop, Buddy assumes that the wads of gum that line the railing on the stairs to the New York subway tunnel are free candy.

To understand Buddy, and really the whole message of love in the movie, you have to learn the "Code of the Elves," which consists of three simple rules: Treat every day

like Christmas. There's room for everyone on the nice list. The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear. You don't have to be an elf to appreciate how living like one could be a good thing. What might surprise you is that under the humor of this film, we can actually find echoes of the gospel message. Let's see if we can unpack them together.

What might it mean to treat every day like Christmas? If we relied entirely on our personal experience of Christmas, that might not be such a great idea. Let's be honest, not all of our Advents or Christmas celebrations have been holy, joyful, peaceful, hopeful, loving, or God honoring.

Christmas, above all else, is a celebration, a grateful acknowledgement that God so loved the world that he came into creation to save it, not with divine and demanding force, but through gentle and sacrificial love. Christmas is the mind-blowing news that God came to find us in our lost and broken world, to bring us back into God's arms, and to remind us that we were made to receive God's love, and to share that love with others.

Beyond that, I suggest that the meaning of Christmas is the love that is written on every page of the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all give witness to God's love in the words and actions of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. And so, we know that Christmas love is child-like. Not childish, mind you, but child-like.

What does the love of a child look like? Buddy the elf shows us some great examples. I love the scene where Buddy is singing to his father in a busy office, making up the words as he goes, and ending with, "I love you! I love you! I love you!" By all reasonable measures, that scene was painfully embarrassing and inappropriate. Buddy can't even carry a tune. And yet, seen from the perspective of the North Pole, Buddy was treating that day like Christmas. He was showing Christmas love to his father, the kind of love that brushes aside convention, expectation, self-doubt, and fear, to boldly assert its truth.

When we celebrate Christmas, it's like God suddenly showing up, when and where we least expect to meet God, and having God sing out loud to us, "I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you!"

Which brings us to the second rule in the Code of the Elves. There's room for everyone on the nice list. Have you ever noticed that some of the songs we remember with such fondness as a child turn out to be a little creepy when we think about the lyrics as adults?

Santa Claus is Coming to Town is one of those songs for me: "He's making a list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is comin' to town. He sees you when you're sleepin'. He knows when you're a wake. He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake!" Isn't that just a little creepy, the idea that Santa is stalking us in the days before Christmas? Is he hacking into our webcams or something?

Sometimes we live our Christian lives thinking that God acts like Santa Claus, spying on us from afar with his lists, ready to pick up his quill and add our name to the naughty list whenever we sin. God does care if we sin because our sin drives a wedge between us and God. Sin is a choice to turn our backs on God and pursue our own agenda. But God is not eagerly waiting to whip out that quill and condemn us. To see God that way would be to miss the whole point of Christmas.

John tells us that God came not to condemn us, but to save us. And because of the birth and sacrificial death of Jesus, there really is room for everyone on the nice list. Does the Christmas love of God mean that everyone will be saved from their sin? Sadly, it does not. Some of us will persistently refuse to turn back toward God, preferring instead to continue living in our own self-manufactured hells. But the Christmas love of God does mean that for those who confess that Jesus is the Lord- in word, heart, and deed- the way has been made clear. God isn't a distant accuser. God is Emmanuel, God

with us, the intimately present God who is eagerly reaching out to us in love, inviting us into a warm and forgiving embrace.

Now what about the third rule of the Code. Is singing out loud for all to hear really such a good idea? Some of us were simply not gifted with musical talent. And yet, perhaps Christmas love has less to do with keeping our singing in tune and more about offering our hearts to God, and the love of God to others.

The book of Psalms, our hymnal, and our praise songs all give us a clue to the connection between our hearts and our voices and the importance that singing out loud has for God's people. When we sing out loud about God's story, our stories, and how the stories intertwine, we rehearse the reality of Christmas love. When we sing about God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace, we're inspired to act that out in our own lives. When we sing about peace, joy, and hope, and love, we remember that the way things may seem today is not the way they will remain forever.

So yes, sing out loud- not Grandma Got Runover by a Reindeer, but how about Joy to the World, or Silent Night?

So why not Elf more and Grinch less? Try to see the miracle of the birth of Jesus with child-like wonder and adopt the Code of the Elves. Give thanks to God and treat others with love as if every day was Christmas. Turn away from your sin and grab hold of the forgiving grace of Jesus, never letting go of it again. And remember, if there's room for you on the "nice list," you can bet there's room also for those people that you've been keeping on your naughty list. And don't forget to sing. Not all songs are equally redeeming, but there's something about singing out loud that just seems to be good for us, as if God intended that we offer praise in that way.

Please take some time now to ask God to fill your heart with the Spirit of love.



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