

The Real Christmas Story: Love Sunday, 12/23/18

1 What is love? Of all the words we use to describe Christmas- Hope, peace, joy, love- love is the most ambiguous, and often the most watered-down. Some of us say we love the Christmas season. That reminds me of elementary school, when we used to think we were so clever when we'd tease each other, "Oh yeah? If you love it, then why don't you marry it?" Oftentimes we use love as a shorthand term for romantic infatuation. But the kind of love that describes the real meaning of Christmas is both more complex and more enduring, something uniquely given by God and expressed by God's people.

Even in the increasingly commercial and secular nation we live in, 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 Baily's brother to fly home, directly from his awards banquet, as soon as he heard that George was in trouble and needed help. It was Christmas love that led little Cindy Lou Who to let the Grinch carve the roast beast.

Today we continue our Advent comparison of the Hollywood Christmas stories we know and love with what we know of the true story and spirit of Christmas as revealed in the Bible. We'll conclude that journey tomorrow night, Christmas Eve, with a look at *A Christmas Carol*.

2 Raise your hand if you've ever answered your phone with, "Buddy the elf- What's your favorite color?" Thanks to caller ID, it's a safe trick for you to play at this time of the year, so I encourage you to have a little fun with your phone calls. The movie *Elf* is not exactly a classic- it's only been around since 2003- but it's both funny and heart-warming at the same time, and its jam packed with acting talent, including Ed Asner and Bob Newhart. The premise of the film is that Buddy the elf discovers that he is actually a human who was raised by elves at the North Pole after he crawled into Santa's bag of toys during Santa's visit to an orphanage. 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, coming from Santa's Workshop, Buddy assumes that the wads of gum that line the railing on the stairs to the 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.” Let’s take a quick refresher course in this short clip:

{TECH: Show Code of the Elves (0:24)}

3 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. Fortunately, as our Confirmation students have been learning, we interpret our lives of faith using more than just our experience. We always begin with the Bible, the inspired word of God. How we read and interpret the Bible, however, requires that we engage our God-given ability to think (or reason), the history and tradition that the church (our sisters and brothers in Christ across the ages) brings to interpreting and living out God’s Word, and lastly our own personal experience with God. So if we’re to understand what it means to treat every day like Christmas, we need to go to the source, the Bible.

4 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- there’s a difference. 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!"

5 Which brings us to the second item 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?

That song got me thinking, though. 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. The truth is that 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, dead- 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.

6 Now what about the third part of the Code. Is singing out loud for all to hear really such a good idea? Let's be honest, some of us were simply not gifted with musical talent. On the other hand, 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 gives 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, 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*? I hope you'll be able to worship somewhere tomorrow night, if not here then wherever you are, because you'll definitely be given a chance to practice this part of the Code of the Elves.

7 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.

Sometimes Christmas is a time of nostalgia that leads us down paths of regret or loss. Sometimes Christmas is a time pain and conflict. And often Christmas is a time of building up unrealistic expectations, only to face disappointment in the days following. Whatever Christmas is for you this year, try to reclaim the real Christmas story, which is at its heart of hearts, a love story. God so loved the world, that he came to us with a warm embrace- Emmanuel, God with us, Christmas love.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



**609 8th Street NW
Buffalo, MN 55313
763-682-3538**

Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com