

The Gift of Love – Christmas Eve 2014

John 3:16-18, 1Cor 13:1-13

Friends, there is a certain irony to the Christmas holiday if you think about it.

The “why” behind this whole celebration is that God so loved the world that He sent his only Son... and yet in preparing to celebrate this expression of God’s amazing love to us, with special pageants, gifts, dinners, and so on...

We can quickly become rather stressed out and get on each other’s nerves, and things become anything but loving - right?

- Out of my way, I’m shopping for Christmas gifts to share the love!
- Can’t find a @#!\$ parking spot anywhere at the mall!
- Kids clean up the family room, company will be here any minute now!
- You’re going to be late, but the kids need to be at the pageant practice in ten minutes!

- I don’t care if they teased you about being the donkey, you can’t kick the other kids in the pageant.

And on it goes...

So it’s very important that we hear the good news at this time of year...

Friends, God gives us His gift of Love at Christmas time, because without it Christmas deteriorates into a dysfunctional family holiday that we dread instead of anticipate.

But friends, Love is such a misused and misunderstood word in our world isn’t it?

We love ice cream and we love our spouse....

We love hockey and we love our kids...

We love Christmas and we love baby Jesus in the manger – and apparently we love Mc Donald’s as well...

The word is love is overused and underappreciated, and that makes it difficult to define. Is it a feeling, an action, a thought, or a belief? Is it enjoyment or is it sacrifice?

Friends, the good news is that God defines what His love is all about in the bible so that we can know it and experience it.

Our kids have just acted out one of the most significant demonstrations of God's love that our world has ever known – the birth of Jesus Christ.

And the skeptics among us might say – ok... how does a baby being born in a stable in some little town all those years ago show us God's love?

Well friends – allow me to contrast the story we just saw presented to us with another famous passage in God's word about love - written by the Apostle Paul.

Paul gives us the most detailed definition of God's love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, maybe you've heard it before?

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

What a great description of God's Love – you can find all sorts of examples of love being expressed like this in the Christmas story...

But there's more to this definition of love than a list of characteristics. If we could read the passage as Paul originally wrote it in the Greek language it would read like this...

*“**agape** is patient, **agape** is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”*

You see friends “Agape” is the word which we translate as “love”, but what is unique about this particular Greek word for love is this passage is that all the qualities which describe

agape, or love, are displayed towards someone *who doesn't deserve them*.

Agape is a love which invests these actions into someone who for all intents and purposes most likely will not return this kind of treatment to you.

Agape is selfless and sacrificial – and some might even say “idiotic”

I'm sure you can imagine showing “agape” towards someone whom you admire. Towards someone who acts selflessly towards others, who is hardworking and dependable, and goes the extra mile.

Maybe even someone who is ravishingly handsome or beautiful...

But agape towards the abuser who will abuse again? Agape towards the addict who will use again? Agape towards the

thief who will steal again? Agape towards the person who will hurt us again?

But friends, at Christmas God so loved the world... He “agaped” the world... that He sent his only Son.

That puts a whole different spin on it doesn't it.

This world which is full of people who ignore God, who don't thank Him for their life, for the blessings which He gives them, who make up false stories, lies about reality to justify their actions, who worship idols and false gods.

People, who continue to hate other people, kill other people, lie to other people, misuse and abuse the creation – and no matter how many times we say we won't, we seem to end up doing it again and again.

But John 3:16 says for God so loved – He agaped - He was patient, kind, kept no record of wrongs...

He is everything that agape is characterized as towards human beings - who over the course of the history of the world only seem to go from bad to worse and show little to no promise of redemption or change.

And in the birth of Christ, Yahweh demonstrates his ultimate act of agape – He personally takes on our rebellious, sin infected human nature and is born as one of us.... so that our human nature can be turned around, changed – redeemed!

Friends, God didn't have to bother with attempting redemption. He wasn't bound to try and salvage something of our relationship with Him when we are habitually unfaithful to him.

We certainly understand that dynamic in our own relationships right?

But Friends - Agape is selfless and sacrificial – and as I said before some might even say “idiotic”. But the scriptures tell us that agape never fails. (1 Cor 13:8)

So God redeemed human nature and his relationship with us through Jesus Christ because of His agape love for us.

And that agape love for us took Jesus all the way to the cross where he died for us – and in a mysterious way when people are confronted with these facts of who Jesus Christ was and what he did, God's agape love doesn't fail – it changes us.

We become a new creations, new human beings in Jesus Christ.

We become people who are capable of showing to others the agape that God has shown to us in Jesus.

And when that happens friends, Christmas becomes a time of celebrating agape.

The parties, the pageants, the gift exchanges all become opportunities to show agape to others....and allow ourselves to receive it as well.

We have the opportunity to give of ourselves in the way God gave of himself in Jesus, and allow others to do the same for us.

That's what Christmas is all about friends.

So as you go from here tonight to celebrate – may the Holy Spirit work in your heart to make this Christmas a celebration of God's love, and may the Holy Spirit work in your mind so that you understand and remember the definition of God's love from the scriptures, and may the Holy Spirit work in your actions so that they reflect and share with others what has happened in your heart and your mind.

For God so loved the world, He sent his only Son – that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.