

"LOVE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 24, 1989

Created by a mother or a father who was poor in possessions. All they could give was love beyond measure.

One does not need to have wealth to create something valuable. One need only reach deep within...where value is defined. One need not have wealth to give a gift. One need only have the desire to give. To use whatever poor things are at hand and to make of them the best gift of all possible.

In all the Western World, there were, I understand, no slums bleaker than those of London, circa 1905. But somewhere in those slums, a sad and sorry doll was born. A doll that can bring tears to your eyes because it is so pitiful. And because it is so very, very beautiful.

CLOSING If you cannot appreciate the story of that raggedy doll, you cannot appreciate the Story of Christmas. A diamond wrapped in a plain cardboard box - the Christ Child. A pitiful doll loved into beauty - us. We are that doll. Look at us. Who are we that God should love us so? There's so little to recommend us. Nothing but His love - a love that "came down at Christmas".

The world might cynically imagine that all it needs is one more baby. But that is its greatest need. For that baby whose birth we now come to celebrate this night brought love into the world. Love for one another. Love for the Christ Child. And - most of all - the very source of that love - God's love for each of us.

PRAYER In these hours as we "brush up" against Eternal Truth once again, we pray that the message may come to us as it never has before. It comes as a gift - a gift for each of us to receive.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is
given;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His
heaven".

Confirm within each of us the feelings and decisions, the affirmations and the resolutions of these quiet moments on this day before Christmas....that not only the hope, the peace, the joy of Advent may be ours, but the love as well. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we offer this prayer. Amen.

There's a beautiful French Christmas story about the four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the Christ Child. One of the shepherds brought eggs, another brought bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the fourth brought nothing at all. People called him "L'Enchant". As the story goes, the first three shepherds chatted for some time with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked, how cozy was the cave and so on... Finally, someone asked "Where is L'Enchant?" They searched around, high and low, up and down, inside and out. Finally, someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft into the creche. And there, kneeling at the crib, was L'Enchant - the "Enchanted One". Through the entire night he stayed in adoration, kneeling and whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu...Jesus, Jesus, Jesus".

And that is where you and I would be this morning, would we not? Kneeling beside the crib whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu". After all, what else can we bring Him and offer to Him, but our hearts. What can we bring? Only our love and adoration. Hopefully, we do that gladly. We offer to Christ our love.

GOD'S LOVE FOR US EXEMPLIFIED IN THE BIRTH OF HIS SON

But the most important love in the world this Christmas is not our love for one another, nor even our love for Christ. To me, the most important love in this world is God's love for us as exemplified in the birth of His Son.

Let me paint a picture for you. In Edinburgh, Scotland, there is a place called The Museum of Childhood. It's filled with childhood treasures - teddy bears, puppets, rocking horses, model trains, books, games and doll houses. And case after case of dolls. Baby dolls, porcelain dolls, costumed dolls, walking and talking dolls, dolls that can turn somersaults, dolls that are expensive. Dolls of privileged children.

But over in one corner is another case and behind its glass pane there is another doll, a doll that sits alone. It's an old, raggedy doll, much the worse for wear. But then, it began its life in somewhat raggedy form.

That this doll was loved, there is no doubt. Nor that it was born of love. For all its shabbiness - and it was shabby the day it was made - it had, and has, a value untold. A sign on it says,

"Doll belonging to London slum child - circa 1905"

The doll is unnamed and the child is unnamed.

The doll's body is made of tattered brown socks, stuffed with rags. Its arms are two thin sticks of wood and covered in wool. Its hair is a sock. It wears a plain gingham dress and a rough linen apron. For all its simplicity, it was made with painstaking effort.

The head is the heel of a man's shoe. Only that. A worn-down battered heel with the nail heads visible around the edges. For a face, the doll has small bits of paper pasted on. Paper eyes. Paper nose. Paper mouth. The mouth does not smile.

Some might call it ugly. But that would be wrong...very wrong...it's possible that the slum child made it for herself. Perhaps, it was a gift.

There's an old story about a skeptic that comes to mind. He asked the local priest, "Tell me this....what's the difference between Christ's mother and my mother?" Replied the priest, "I don't know...but there is a very great difference between the sons."

Mary is venerated by millions of Christians because of the uniqueness of her son. She knew that within the plain brown wrappings of that stable and a manger and some shepherds and lowing cattle, that the world had been forever changed. How? Christina Rossetti put it so beautifully,

"Love came down at Christmas. Love so lovely, so divine.
Love came down at Christmas. Star and angel gave the sign."

"Love came down at Christmas". That is the message for this morning. Love was born in the manger of Bethlehem. What kind of love? All kinds.

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Love for one another. This is why many of us are weary from shopping this time of year. We're busy trying to find just the right kind of gift to say, I love you. A cartoon of recent days showed three little boys coming to the manger bearing their gifts. The first two boys brought traditional gifts representing the gold and the frankincense. The third little boy, however, came to the manger not with myrrh, but with a box of disposable diapers. Mary could only have wished.

Christmas is that time of year when we try with our gifts to say to our family and friends how very much they mean to us. And hopefully, our love is not a narrow and exclusive thing. Christmas usually helps us, too, to be more thoughtful about the needs of people who are less fortunate.

A baby was left on the doorsteps many years ago of a home in Georgetown, Pennsylvania. A widow was head of that home, a widow with several children of her own to look after. But she took in that baby and loved it like one of her own. In the evenings she would read great books to her children, and one of them, at least, developed a great taste for literature. That same baby today abandoned on a doorstep is one of our most prolific writers - James Michener.

James Michener's life is a kind of triumph of the unselfish love of that widowed mother. That's the kind of love we celebrate this day before Christmas - love for one another and love for those less fortunate.

LOVE FOR THE CHRIST CHILD

But we also celebrate, secondly, another kind of love - our love for the Christ Child.

A young family was getting ready to go home for Christmas. The car was all packed and the mail and the newspaper delivery had been tended to. A neighbor would keep an eye on the house - feed the dog, water the plants. All the gifts for parents and grandparents had somehow been fitted into the trunk. They had plenty of anti-freeze in the radiator. Suitcases and hanging clothes were all in place and they were ready to take off. The husband started out of the driveway when all of a sudden the wife gasped, "Honey, we've forgotten the baby!" And it was true. In all the excitement and the packing of luggage and gifts, they had forgotten their most precious cargo - their baby! We can forget the baby, too, if we are not careful. That's so easy to do this time of year. But we dare not make that mistake. Remember He is the reason for the season!

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INTRODUCTION

When one seven year old boy was told about his new baby sister, he was not impressed. At school the next day, his teacher remarked, "I hear you have a new member of your family". "Yeah" he replied. Sensing his lack of enthusiasm, his teacher asked, "What's the matter. Aren't you happy to have a new sister?" He replied, "Yea...I guess so...but there were a lot of things we needed more".

Some people when they hear the Christmas story for the first time may be tempted to react in a similar way...what the world needs most is not another baby. But how wrong they are! Someone has said that when God wants something done in this world of our He has a baby born. We know that was true of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The prophet, Isaiah, has spoken of old:

"Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,
and His name shall be called, 'Emmanuel',
(which means, God is with us)"

We have gathered this day to acknowledge the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Messiah has been born to Mary and Joseph in the little town of Bethlehem.

DEVELOPMENT

It was in a stable that He was born. And what a strange place for the nativity of the King of Kings. What plain and shabby surroundings for the birth of the Messiah!

A South Africa diamond miner found one of the world's largest diamonds. It was the size of a small lemon. The miner needed to get the diamond safely to the company's office in London, so he sent it in a small steel box and hired four men to carry it. But when the package arrived at the office in London and was carefully opened, it contained no diamond. Rather it contained a lump of black coal. Three days later the diamond arrived by ordinary parcel post in a plain package. The owner had assumed correctly that most people would not pay attention to an ordinary cardboard box.

Something like that took place that first Christmas. Who would ever think to look in a stable for the "incarnate" God? Only a few "star-struck" shepherds and some travel-weary astrologers took note of what was happening in the tiny town of Bethlehem that night. No one else heard the angels. No one else saw the star. The rest of the world saw only a plain cardboard box. They could not know that box contained the advent of God's love into this strife-torn world.

Joseph knew. An angel appeared to him in a dream.

"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife,
for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit;
she will bear a son and you shall call His name Jesus, for
He will save His people from their sins."

Mary knew, too. In her amazement and adoration, she sang:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God,
my Savior, for He has regarded the lowly estate of His
handmaiden".

INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we continue with our Advent journey toward Christmas and the Child who grew to be our King.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

We come like shepherds, lonely and seeking.

We come like Wise Men, so often looking in the wrong places for Your gifts.

We come because year after year we have heard the angels sing and been reminded of the gift of love.

We remember the HOPE He shared with the discouraged,
the HEALING He brought to the sick.

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers
this hour:

Rebecca Daseler, infant daughter of Kim and Allison
Craig Radney. Marion Busk. Daisy Herrick. Bert
Williams. Ada Kinney. All...

beloved members and friends of this congregation. And let your
healing benediction touch each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the unspoken prayers in the deep places of our lives,
now offered to Thee on the altars of our hearts....spoken in the spirit of
Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth
as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our
trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against
us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory, forever. Amen."

ADVENT WREATH / CANDLE AND BANNER

FOURTH SUNDAY

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Each Sunday during Advent, the boys and girls of our Sunday School have been joining us down here for a few minutes at the beginning of each service...to sing and to lead us in the lighting of the Advent candles.

Today, we have a number of candle lighters...brothers and sisters...sharing in the fun of lighting these candles. They are:

Denita and Kareem McKeiver
Kendal and Nigel James
Dawn Chauncey and Nafisha Jennings
Rosey and Eleanor Kinchen.

Our Fourth Advent banner now hangs here on the wall beside us helping to remind us of the love of this Holy Season. Jesus always brings hope and peace and joy and love in to our lives. Before we light the candles, the boys and girls are going to sing all four verses of "Light the Advent Candle".

Following the singing and the lighting of the candles we shall have a brief prayer and this, in turn, will be followed by the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

PRAYER

"Fill our hearts, O God, with the Christmas lights of hope and peace, of joy and love on this Day before Christmas.

For these special moments together in Your House, dear God, we thank you. And we thank you for these children - our most special gifts - and for their helping us to prepare ourselves for the gift of the Child of Bethlehem.

Bless us all together and help us to listen carefully that we may hear the song of the angels. In the spirit of the Christ Child we now pray.

BAPTISM

We invite the children to remain for the baptism of Linnea and Peter Jacobson, daughter and son of Peter and Janet Jacobson of our church family. If the Jacobsons will join me at the baptismal font...we shall proceed.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 24, 1989

WE THANK YOU, O GOD, for the light that came into our world in the
life of Jesus.

Help each of us to catch something of that light in
our lives.

Let it shine through us to pierce the darkness of
some life...some home...of some situation
this Christmas Season.

By way of Bethlehem, lead us, Lord, to newness of life.

By the innocence of the Christ Child, renew our simple
trust.

By the tenderness of Mary, deliver us from hardness of
heart, from cruelty, from violence.

By the patience of Joseph, save us from rash and unkind
judgements of others, and thus enable us to
persevere through life's more difficult moments.

By the Wise men's long and tedious journey, keep our
searching spirits from fainting.

By the shining of a star, guide our feet in the path of
good will, brotherhood and peace on earth.

LORD, AS WE REJOICE in the joy and wonder of these days -

Without forgetting the sadness, the sorrow, the hunger,
the hurt, the poverty and prejudice that are
abroad in our world...

We would remember that light that the darkness cannot
put out,

Cheer us with the song of the angels, and let the spirit of
love be born anew in our hearts this Christmas.

FOR WE ASK all these things in the name and spirit of Him who was born in a
stable, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, December 24, 1989

GREETING / VISITORS

A word of warm greeting to the visitors in the congregation this morning....we're delighted to have you here with us and we hope that we shall have opportunity....

Join us downstairs at the coffee hour, if time permits. Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card, sign a guest book. Come, worship with us on other occasions....work with us in the outreach concerns of our parish.

We minister in the name of Christ...doing so since 1837...and it is in his loving spirit that we greet you all on this Fourth Sunday of Advent.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

We wish all of you a joyous and Merry Christmas. May the Christmas lights of peace and hope, joy and love be yours this Christmas.

It's a wonderful time of the year. The holidays usually bring families together and how nice it is to welcome some of our students home from college as well as to greet the parents and the grandparents of some of you.

PARISH CONCERNS

The parish concerns are there before you in the bulletin. Review them on your own, noting the word especially about the 1990 Financial Canvass...we still have a ways to go before it's completed. Help us if you can with a pledge of financial support for 1990, if you have not yet already done so.

Our thanks to all of you who responded so generously to the Christmas flower fund...for the tree, the wreaths, the pointsettias... the list of long of all who have given. Our thanks to each of you.

Also, our thanks for the many Christmas gifts to the Church at this time of the year. They do make a difference and we are most grateful for "gifts received" and those to be received here today.

Remember that at eight o'clock this evening we have our traditional Christmas Eve service of carols and candles. All are invited. It's always a lovely service...a chance to sing the carols, to light a candle, to worship the Christ Child in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary. Come. Bring a friend with you.

OFFERING

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship the Christ Child with our gifts...tithes and offerings.

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DEVELOPMENT

It was in a stable that He was born. And what a strange place for the nativity of the King of Kings. What plain and shabby surroundings for the birth of the Messiah!

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And that is where you and I would be this morning, would we not? Kneeling beside the crib whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu". After all, what else can we bring Him and offer to Him, but our hearts. What can we bring? Only our love and adoration. Hopefully, we do that gladly. We offer to Christ our love.

GOD'S LOVE FOR US EXEMPLIFIED IN THE BIRTH OF HIS SON

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world this Christmas is not our love for one another, nor even our love for Christ. To me, the most important love in this world is God's love for us as exemplified in the birth of His Son.

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But over in one corner is another case and behind its glass pane there is another doll, a doll that sits alone. It's an old, raggedy doll, much the worse for wear. But then, it began its life in somewhat raggedy form.

That this doll was loved, there is no doubt. Nor that it was born of love. For all its shabbiness - and it was shabby the day it was made - it had, and has, a value untold. A sign on it says,

"Doll belonging to London slum child - circa 1905"

The doll is unnamed and the child is unnamed.

The doll's body is made of tattered brown socks, stuffed with rags. Its arms are two thin sticks of wood and covered in wool. Its hair is a sock. It wears a plain gingham dress and a rough linen apron. For all its simplicity, it was made with painstaking effort.

The head is the heel of a man's shoe. Only that. A worndown battered heel with the nail heads visible around the edges. For a face, the doll has small bits of paper pasted on. Paper eyes. Paper nose. Paper mouth. The mouth does not smile.

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Created by a mother or a father who was poor in possessions. All they could give was love beyond measure.

One does not need to have wealth to create something valuable. One need only reach deep within...where value is defined. One need not have wealth to give a gift. One need only have the desire to give. To use whatever poor things are at hand and to make of them the best gift of all possible.

In all the Western World, there were, I understand, no slums bleaker than those of London, circa 1905. But somewhere in those slums, a sad and sorry doll was born. A doll that can bring tears to your eyes because it is so pitiful. And because it is so very, very beautiful.

CLOSING If you cannot appreciate the story of that raggedy doll, you cannot appreciate the Story of Christmas. A diamond wrapped in a plain cardboard box - the Christ Child. A pitiful doll loved into beauty - us. We are that doll. Look at us. Who are we that God should love us so? There's so little to recommend us. Nothing but His love - a love that "came down at Christmas".

The world might cynically imagine that all it needs is one more baby. But that is its greatest need. For that baby whose birth we now come to celebrate this night brought love into the world. Love for one another. Love for the Christ Child. And - most of all - the very source of that love - God's love for each of us.

PRAYER In these hours as we "brush up" against Eternal Truth once again, we pray that the message may come to us as it never has before. It comes as a gift - a gift for each of us to receive.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is
given;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His
heaven".

Confirm within each of us the feelings and decisions, the affirmations and the resolutions of these quiet moments on this day before Christmas....that not only the hope, the peace, the joy of Advent may be ours, but the love as well. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we offer this prayer. Amen.