

“LOVE ALL!”
by Rom A. Pegram (12/24/20)

Several Christmases ago, some churches got together to change Christmas in a very tangible way—to really live out their faith in a way that shared God’s love with others. They journeyed to Africa with a team to make plans for digging freshwater wells in places around the world that most of us don’t even know exist. (I have a friend in Maryland who runs a well ministry in his retirement.) The villages they worked with were so far off the beaten path that some of the original team that went didn’t even know if they could reach these folks to see what their life situation really was. But they eventually did...

When they finally got to one of the villages they’d be working with, they were greeted with open arms and beautiful smiles, which is typical. They were led through tall grasses to what they referred to as ‘their well.’ It sat next to a swamp that leaked untold disease into the well water that families from this village used every day—water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, etc. They described it as a ‘stagnant, gray-green pool infested with insects.’ And they watched the women of the village come to get water and brush away the film that clung to the top of the water. You get the picture...

They knew what they wanted to do—to use their Christmas offerings that year to help those in need. And when that message of hope was delivered to the ‘elder’ of the village, his weathered face remained lifeless. He simply stared at them. (*They wondered if their translator had mistakenly said the wrong thing!*) But, when he asked the chief if he understood what this would mean for his people, his answer was unforgettable:

“Others have made promises in the name of this Jesus,
but they were never kept.”

In other words, he’d heard it all before ... and to no avail. Here was a man whose hope had dried up, because others made promises in the name of Jesus they’d never bothered to keep...

Somewhere along the line, this man and his village were probably ‘told the right things’ about Jesus—how God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, and so forth. Apparently, they were spoken to by well-meaning Christians along the way, those that had recognized their struggle. But no one showed up. Nothing changed. Children were still dying in their villages ... and the name of Jesus ‘had been dragged through the mud’...

It’s one thing to tell people that God loves them, but it’s entirely another to be *an active agent of God’s love*. Author Scot McKnight warns that the Church suffers when it treats human as just souls to be saved ... rather than whole persons made for now and eternity! Yes, sometimes *we’re so focused on what happens to people after they die that we forget to pay attention to how they’re living right now*. Jesus did both, and we must too...

We’ve just been through a celebration of the first Advent, but—as believers—we have a Second Advent to look forward to. The Second Advent is talked about in tonight’s scripture; please listen carefully (Matthew 25:31-46, NLT)...

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. ³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’ ³⁷ “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’ ⁴¹ “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. ⁴² For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’ ⁴⁴ “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’ ⁴⁵ “And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’ ⁴⁶ “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”

In other words, it’s not enough just to tell the world that God loves them; we need to be active agents of God’s love, too! **WHAT WE DO WITH OUR LIVES—ESPECIALLY THOSE OF US WHO CLAIM TO BE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST—REALLY DOES MATTER.** Here, folks, is the heart of the Christmas story:

FIRST, IT WAS GOD’S TURN ...TO SHOW HIS LOVE TO THE WORLD! There’s no way around it: Jesus calls *us* to love & care for the poor!

On that first Christmas, 2,000+ years ago, *God came to the poor.* In other words, God came to each one of us. The Apostle Paul reminds us in this way (2 Cor. 8:9, MSG):

“You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us—in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.”

So, what does this mean exactly? Well, Jesus gave up the glory of heaven ... to be born into a sin-scarred world! He moved from the right hand of God, in heaven, to come and be a part of our history. That glorious day in Bethlehem, every day of his earthly life, and even through the deadly pain he experienced on the cross, Jesus became poor for our sake! *He entered our poverty so that we would no longer be poor!* He entered our pitiful

existence so that this wouldn't be all there was; because he gave up his status and all that went with it in heaven—for 33 years of his earthly life, he did this so that we too could know what eternity was all about! Isn't that something?

And, folks, please know that this was God's doing; God loved us first ... and sent the very best he had—his own Son—so that we might have his very best forever. That's the gift of Christmas. For those of us who are poor (spiritually speaking, which is all of us), *this is very good news*. And *Jesus is the heart of this story*—the Christmas story...

Here's a question for you tonight though: IS THIS STORY STILL RELEVANT IN OUR WORLD TODAY? Can Christmas still change the world, as it did over 2,000 yrs ago? If so, how can Christmas and the way we choose to celebrate it still make that kind of a difference?

As poor people who have met with the righteous wealth of God (the Christ of Christmas), *it's now our turn to model his generosity by sharing our blessings with those in need...*

- Christmas is our chance to move closer to those in crisis, not further away...
- Christmas is our time to notice those who are normally ignored...

That's what God did ... through Jesus. In short, *it's our turn to love as we've been loved!* Folks, Jesus is the heart of the Christmas story! But ... it doesn't end there...

NOW, IT'S OUR TURN ... TO SHARE GOD'S LOVE WITH THE WORLD! We cannot allow the broken & vulnerable to become invisible!

At Christmas, one of the particular distinctions of a 'Christ-follower' is a love that reaches out to...

- The hungry (Food Pantry)...
- The thirsty (Food Pantry)...
- The sick (Hospital Ministry/Shut-Ins)...
- The imprisoned (Prison Ministry)...

Such giving is a true act of worship! There's a close connection between how we treat others and how we treat God. Did you know that? As our scripture reminded us tonight, Jesus said that *whatever we do for the least of his brothers & sisters, we do for him!* God takes these acts of love (or the opposite) very personally... So, we cannot allow the broken & vulnerable to become invisible in this world! And here's something else we need to keep in mind...

When we show up & love *in the name of Jesus*, Jesus himself still shows up! That's part of the mystery of partnering with Jesus in the work he's still doing in this ol' world...

There was a morning news show I was watching one week, where a Jesuit priest wrote a book claiming that ‘the war for Christmas’ has been lost. Folks, I beg to differ... Imagine what would happen if Trinity Church partnered with Operation Christmas Child in telling the world about Jesus’ birth *and* actually living out the story of his sacrificial love. By the way, these two things must go hand-in-hand: telling the Good News *and* living it out as Jesus’ disciples ... *always go together!* We will love others the way God has loved us...

And one way we can do this is to give out of our blessings to help those in need ‘to the ends of the earth.’ As I’ve mentioned throughout the season, there are people in this world who do not have the blessings we have—even the essentials; *people are dying—physically and spiritually, many of them children.* They need to know they are loved at Christmastime in a tangible way; but they also need to know *the One Christmas is all about*—the Christ of Christmas. We need to be concerned with both their life here & now, as well as their eternal life. And both these things can happen when we partner to this end...

Once again, our Stewardship & Finance Committee has decided that 10% of our Christmas Eve offering this year will be going directly to help with our OCC (Operation Christmas Child) Ministry happening out of Trinity Church. And this will be done ... in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who was born in Bethlehem many, many years ago. It’s about the concept of ... LOVING ALL—all whom God has called us to love: ‘the least of these’ ... and ‘to the ends of the earth!’

Folks, as we close this time tonight, I just want to remind you of 2 ways we can keep Christ in the center of Christmas AND keep the story of Christmas alive:

1. The Christmas Offering is still receiving gifts—even after Christmas. Yes, our Christmas offering helps with the general expenses of the ongoing ministry we do here at Trinity, but this year we’re tithing off of the Christmas Offering. The first 10% will be given directly to our OCC (Operation Christmas Child) shoebox project—that many might know the love of God in a tangible way in the year to come... This is one way we can LOVE ALL this Christmas—to make a real difference in this world for him...
2. Here’s the second way to keep Christ in the center and keep his story alive: Attached to our Weekly Update (email) this week is a copy of the Christmas Story from the Gospel of Luke in a very readable version of scripture. Take this home with you and use it with your family in creative ways. Make the Christmas Story a part of your family Christmas celebration each year! Let’s keep the story going in this way, too!

We are the ones who have been given this lavish gift of life with God, and now we are called to enter this broken world and love differently—to rethink Christmas, if you will. And when we do folks, **Christmas can still change the world. It can happen when we choose to LOVE ALL...**