

Sermon by the Rev. Anne C. Seddon given at Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse,
Wisconsin on January 1, 2017

Text: John 1: 1, 3-4, 14

30th Anniversary of Ordination

We are at the midpoint of the great season of Christmastide. The celebration of God's greatest gift to us – his LOVE bestowed on us in His beloved Son our Savior, Jesus Christ!

We all know the beautiful story of His birth as proclaimed in the gospel according to Luke. We heard it on Christmas Eve!

And it was filled with wonder indeed. With joy and bright shining stars; with choirs of angels and humble shepherds -- all worshipping in awe the newborn King.

On this the first Sunday after Christmas we hear John's version of the awesomeness of Christ in the very beginning of all time.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... (John 1:1)

All things came into being through Him and without Him NOT ONE thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.” (John 1: 3-4)

“In the beginning was the WORD – the Greek word used here in John's gospel in LOGOS – another translation for logos in “MEANING”. So let me re-read the opening line:

“In the beginning was the MEANING.... and the MEANING was God”

He -- Christ.... the Word.... is the meaning of everything!

The sun and stars; the mountains, rivers and oceans; the birds of the air, the fish of the seas; the deer and the buffalo..... all exist and have their being because of Him!

And above all -- He -- the Christ -- is the meaning of you and me.

Our very existence is rooted in Him. Without Him there is NOTHING!!

This awesome WORD -- the meaning if everything -- this Jesus,

“became flesh
and dwelt among us” (John 1:14)

Why? Why, why, why, I wonder?

Quiet simply: to love us and to teach us how to love.

Now love is a very overused word in our culture. We use it to describe how we feel about a wide variety of things. For example: I love peanut butter and pizza; I love my new car. I love the clothes, toys, books and gift cards I got for Christmas.

The list is seemingly endless!

And, of course: I love my husband, my children and grandchildren. And -- I love each of you.

There is a big difference however between loving Christmas presents and loving each other.

How did Jesus love? And what does loving really involve?

So often we want it to be warm, fuzzy feelings about our families and friends. And that is certainly part of it. But Jesus goes way beyond warm, fuzzy feelings. Jesus' love is deeper and richer than that. It is also tougher and stronger than that!

Let's just look at a few examples. Jesus' love calls us to repentance. Jesus loved the Pharisees so much that he challenged them to give up their hypocritical ways. Jesus loved the woman caught in adultery so much that he not only forgave her but told her to go and sin no more. Yes, Jesus' love calls us to account!

If you will bear with me, I would like to share two examples of the transformative power of Jesus' love in my own life.

First, Jesus' love challenges us to be and do more than we think we are capable of.

I was born and raised a devout Roman Catholic. I was a happy and committed Roman Catholic for 35 years. Jack and I were so committed we even founded a community of prayer for married couples. Then one day, I was driving along the highway from Connecticut to New York (where I was studying theology). I was listening to and singing along with tapes of my favorite hymns and suddenly heard very clearly in my heart:

“Why won’t you move
to where I can use you?”

I was totally stunned! So stunned, in fact, that I had to pull over to the side of the road. All I could think was:

“I thought I was serving you, Lord?”

All that came back was: “You can do more. Why won’t you move?”

This was literally my ‘Paul on the road to Damascus’ moment. It knocked me off my horse!

I had known since the age of ten that I was supposed to be a priest but just accepted that it wasn't possible. I had a lot to ponder. And Ponder I did. I went home that day and talked to Jack. We begin to pray... and pray... and pray. Our prayer and reflection led us to explore the Episcopal Church. We found a home we never knew we needed!

Our Rector wanted the Bishop to meet us (to know we were in his diocese!) and so he set up an appointment. Five years later I was ordained a priest and Jack received a PhD in theology.... different gifts, different calls, but both from the same Spirit.

Together we have been teaching and pastoring God’s people for the past 30 years wherever possible.

Yes, Jesus’ love challenges us to be and do more than we think we can be and do. Because He loves us, He challenges us to new depths!

Secondly, one final example. Jesus’ love teaches and heals us.

Twenty years ago, I was in the deepest emotional and spiritual pain of my life. It was the closest I ever hope to come to despair in my life. I felt totally alone and helpless. It was crushing me. I was crying all the time -- especially in church.

Then two things happened.

One: God spoke clearly to my heart in the midst of my turmoil when He caused me to discover, in Psalm 46, the powerful phrase:

“Be still and know that I AM”

“Be still and know that I AM”

Stop trying to know everything, fix everything, understand everything. Just: “Be still and know that I AM” As I learned to rest in Him and just be with Him, He taught me to pray more deeply. My time with Him in prayer began to increase.

Two: He gave me my first grandchild (you know him as Peter). This precious child filled my days with such wonder and joy that I found hope again.

Jesus’ love taught me to pray more deeply and healed my spirit. Yes, Jesus’ love teaches and heals us.

Jesus’ love is far more than warm, fuzzy feelings. It is deep and rich... it is TANGIBLE. It calls us to account, challenges us, teaches and heals us, forgives us, and even nourishes us in Holy Communion.

I remember a simple hymn when I was very young. I can't remember when or where I learned it but it has always been with me. Let me share it with you now.

Love one another
Love one another
as I have loved you

Share with each other
and care for each other
as I have cared for you

And bear one another’s burdens
and share each others joys
and love one another
love one another
and bring each other home.

In 2017 I pray that we will love each other enough to teach each other, to heal each other, to challenge each other to be better disciples and even to call each other to repentance and new life in Christ.

Let us pray:

Dearest Lord Jesus, you are the Father's gift of love to us-- you are the meaning of our existence. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit that we will find the strength and courage to love as fully and as deeply as you do. Help us to bring each other home to you and the Father. AMEN!