

No one is more excited to see Christmas come than I am. This year was a different Christmas for us. For the first time in forty-five years we woke up on Christmas morning with no one else in the house. I did the 10:00 o'clock service here which was truly delightful, and then Elizabeth and I spent a couple of hours volunteering at the Beacon.

You may have seen some of the media coverage. It was good public exposure even if they didn't get it quite right. The newspaper said that we thought we were going to have to close the Beacon on Christmas because of lack of funds, and were saved at the last minute by a Christmas miracle. It makes a good Christmas story, and lack of funds is a real problem, but I'm not sure how the story ever came out quite like that.

We were never planning on closing for Christmas, and especially not because of funds. There was concern that we would have a hard time getting volunteers so the services were limited – no laundry or showers that day. It was planned to do limited food as well because of the number of servers needed. And then there was a last minute donation of food – and what seemed to me a virtual outpouring of volunteers. Over 450 ate lunch that day. Funny thing was I found – that for me – it was a good way to start Christmas Day.

Later in the afternoon we had Christmas dinner with some friends, and then about 8:00 o'clock that night our youngest son and our two-year old granddaughter arrived at Bush airport. So we did the Christmas tree and presents thing the day after Christmas.

It was a slower, quieter – maybe gentler Christmas than some in past years. Christmas changes as I grow older, but the magic doesn't go away. It only deepens. Mine is no spirit of humbrity. I have little patience with the popular cynicism of complaining about having too much to do or too many parties to go to. Of course there are aspects of Christmas that can be criticized. Such is the nature of being human. Anything can be distorted. But at heart I am still a child about Christmas. I want to be; I choose to be. I want to be able to be touched by the mystery of love incarnate. I want to be awed by the realization that the love of God, is so intense, so intimate, that it could not remain separate and aloof but touched the world and entered into the places where we live and love.

No one is more excited to see Christmas come than me. And no one is more excited to see it go. For me it's mostly a matter of disruption. Things are moved around to make a place for a tree and other decorations. Counter tops are cluttered, and nothing is in its normal place, which means I can't find anything. Offices are closed, and even if they aren't closed, people are gone. It's hard to make contacts or get anything done. "We'll do that as soon as the holidays are over." How many times have I heard that or said that?

And here we are, still Christmas. It's sort of like an out-of-body liturgical experience. We did all the Christmas things and moved on. The ball has dropped in Times Square. There have been four hundred plus college football bowl games and the big one is about to happen. And we're still singing Christmas carols. What more is there to say about Christmas?

And maybe that is just the point. Christmas isn't just a day, or a season, or even a sentiment of love as magical as the moment may be. Something happened when the love of God invaded the ordinary lives of ordinary people. The face of God was revealed in the face of Christ. The nature of God is not a

nature of punishment and retribution; it is the nature of forgiveness and sacrifice. The depth point of love is vulnerability. If that doesn't change my life – every year, every Christmas, for every day – then I missed the point. Then it really was just about the lights and the presents after all.

In my haste to return to normal I need to realize that *normal* has changed. “O God,” we prayed only a few moments ago, “who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity.”

I don't restore the dignity of humanity to others; God has done that. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus means that the reality of God is present in every human being. Humanity itself is holy. God has made it so. I don't restore human dignity to anyone; God has done that already. All I can do is recognize that divine dignity or else have the incredible arrogance to ignore it. To treat any human being with contempt is to be contemptuous of God. How could I go through Christmas and not be changed? The birth of this infant in a stable isn't just about me. It is about all humanity. This same child died for the sake of the entire world.

And that really is the point of Christmas. How will I live my life differently because of this love? Christmas and Easter are not separate stories. One is defined by the other. Each is why the other is important.

Love has broken into the world. Humanity has been made holy. But the depth point of this divine love now become human is forgiveness. The incarnation of God is the infleshment of forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't just the business of God; it is the essence of humanity as well.

Gordon Wilson was a man whose daughter died from an IRA bomb in Ireland fifteen or more years ago. They were in a building when the bomb exploded; Gordon Wilson survived, his daughter didn't.

Later he wrote: “Forgiveness and excusing are not simply different but polar opposites. To be Christian means to forgive the inexcusable.”

Excusing is a magnanimous act of graciousness. It's like a pardon. It is a gift given from one on the higher moral ground to one who is inferior. There is an inequality not only implied but imbedded.

Forgiveness comes as an act of love because we can do no other. It will always be costly; it will always involve sacrifice. “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Luke tells the delightful little biographical snippet of Jesus as a twelve-year old. Don't think of your own twelve-year old or twelve-year olds that you know. It was the age of transition to adulthood in the days of Jesus. Adolescence is a relatively modern invention. Jesus was not grown, but he was close.

You know the story. They had come to Jerusalem for Passover and were returning to Nazareth when Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was not with them. It took them three days to find him in the Temple of Jerusalem. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”

Don't over sentimentalize the story and try to make it be about raising children in the twenty-first century. The important part comes at the end. “I must be in my Father's house. I must be about my Father's business.”

And so must we. There are many things that we as Christians need to say. There are stands that need to be taken. But unless we begin and end in the love of Christ we are but tilting at windmills caught up in our arrogance. That is what Christmas is really about. And it never ends.

Amen.

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Dean