

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON for Dec. 24, 2021

Grace Lutheran Church

TEXT: Luke 2: 1-20 (The Birth of Jesus)

TITLE: "A Celebration of Love"

by Jim Hill

I need love. You need love. Everyone on earth needs love. Even my dog needs love – especially my dog, our dog. She constantly craves love and affection! She's about 20 pounds now, but when we got her she was such a tiny thing. I often joke that she was taken too soon from her mother's nipple and now she's an emotional cripple!

We human beings can't live without love. We need intimacy, whether its physical intimacy, like a hug; or emotional intimacy, like laughing with someone or crying with them; or intellectual intimacy, such as being of like mind with someone – on the same wavelength as they say.

But during Covid we've often had to do without these kinds of love, which are normal among family or friends or co-workers, and it's caused some psychological agony and spiritual suffering, especially for those who don't have faith in the over-arching, cosmic love of God.

We know that an infant will die without food; but an infant will die just as quickly without a mother's love, without being embraced and cuddled and receiving a mother's tender care and affection.

From our babyhood on, until we leave the nest, the most important love, the most vital love that we receive, is from our mother. That's why God's choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus was so important. We are told in Luke chapter 1, verse 28, that the angel Gabriel greeted Mary saying, "*kecharitoméne*", a Greek past participle which can mean not only "highly favoured one", but also "a person endowed with grace". In that sense, Mary was "full of grace" (as Roman Catholics say in their "Hail Mary" prayer). Grace means unconditional love, and this was the grace Mary had, to pass on to her baby Jesus.

Love from his mother was the necessary start of Jesus' life and his vocation of being God's chosen vessel, unique in history, to bring God's love and grace to the whole world. And he did. Jesus demonstrated what real love looks like. Jesus embodied God's love and shared with us God's Holy Spirit, so that we could have power to love as he did.

So, Mary, Jesus' mother, was the most important source of love for Jesus' soul in his early life.

The second most important person in Jesus' early life (as it is for us) was his father, whose name was Joseph. He was a super-kind and caring man, who in that society had every moral and legal right (and even obligation) to abandon Mary because Mary was having a child that wasn't his.

But God had a plan, and the Scriptures tell us that an angel came to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." So he married Mary, and raised Jesus as his own. The Scriptures indicate that Joseph dearly loved his wife and child, so much that he went to the extreme of becoming a refugee and taking them to Egypt for a couple of years, until King Herod was dead, who was seeking to kill any rivals to his throne. Tradition says that when Joseph got back to Bethlehem, he taught his son his own craft, of carpentry. I'm sure he was a most caring and loving teacher. And how important it is, to have a caring and loving teacher!

History shows us that this kind of love does not come naturally. It seems that children don't need to be taught to be self-centred and grasping, or piggish and greedy, or disobedient and stubborn. Behaving badly seems to come naturally for children. But learning to love is harder. Children learn how to love not only by being loved, but also by seeing their parents demonstrate unselfish love, toward the

child herself, toward each other, and toward people outside the family. And a child knows whether that love is genuine.

But where do their parents get that true love to share with their children? From their parents? And from those parents' parents? Sure, but it has to start somewhere; it can't be self-manufactured by any human being. It starts with an awareness that the Creator of this world loves his creation, including you and me. The Holy Scriptures tell us: "We love, because God first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

This the foundation of my whole life: my faith, that God loves me, always and forever, no matter who else loves me or doesn't love me, no matter how much dying I must endure in this life before I'm resurrected, no matter what, God loves me. And the best evidence I've found, that God truly loves me and all human beings, is that God was born miraculously into this world 2000 years ago, in the form of that unique human being named Jesus. In that sense, God got down to our level, able to relate to us, able to suffer and die to earn forgiveness for our sins. In Jesus Christ we can see how much God loves us, see God's love in black and white and colour.

This, I believe, is the essence of Christianity. It's certainly the essence of Christmas.

Let me close with a beautiful little poem, by the 19th-century British poet, Christina Rossetti.

Love	came	down	at	Christmas,
Love	all	lovely,	Love	Divine;
Love	was	born	at	Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.				
Worship	we		the	Godhead,
Love	Incarnate,		Love	Divine;
Worship	we		our	Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?				

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

Amen.