

**Message: “A Better Love”, Week 2 of  
“The Christmas Payoff” series on 12-04-2016**

**Presented by Rev. Kristen Lowe at  
Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.**

# *The Christmas Payoff*



I have a clergy friend that I had lunch with the other day. She was telling me about the dilemma in her household. She had grown up with the tradition that at Thanksgiving, the family all gathers. After lunch they would go out and cut the tree, bring it in and spend the afternoon on into the evening decorating it. The tree would be up for the duration of Advent and come down right after Christmas when it was crispy and ready for the curb.

Her husband grew up with the tradition that Advent was Advent and that preparing for Christmas was a waiting time. Santa brought the tree on Christmas Eve and it stayed up for the remainder of the Christmas season through Epiphany – January 6<sup>th</sup> – which celebrates the arrival of the Magi.

You can see how tricky this is as they try to mesh these very meaningful and intimate traditions.

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This of course begs the question: What is Christmas – really? Are we focused on the wrong things? Have we actually manufactured our own version of hope, love, joy and peace? Where do all these customs and traditions come from? How on earth did we get from the Messiah – born out of God’s greater love for us – to red and green representing the holiday, Star Wars ornaments, egg nog, the exchanging of gifts and fruitcake?

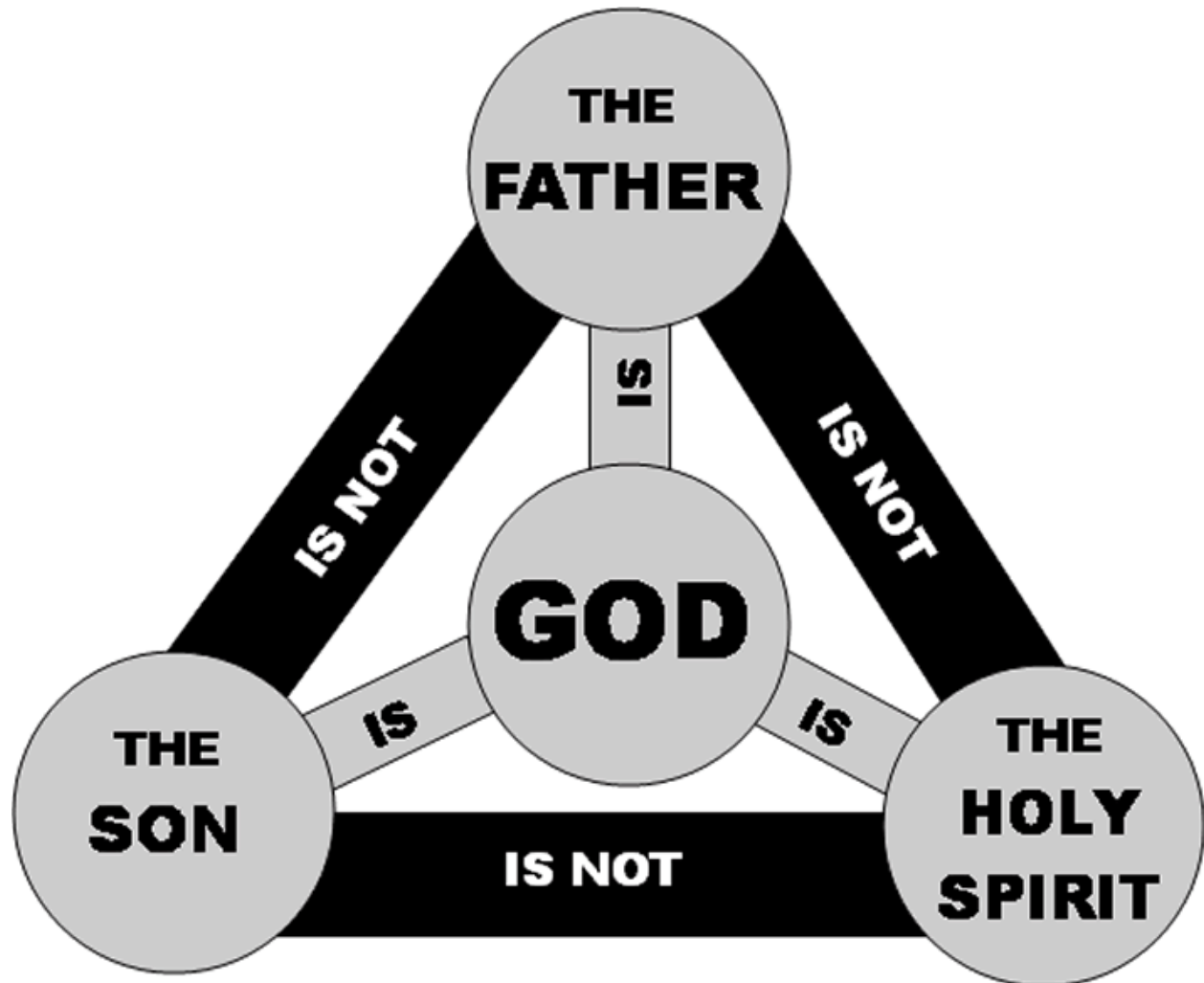
I think the short answer is that we recognize the essence of God’s love for us as something that brings extraordinary hope, love, joy and peace. And we want it so badly that instead of going to the source... which would require us to go deep, we try to manifest this essence in tangible ways – you know, stay safe and shallow. And we let modern culture and consumerism elbow their way into our hearts. It means, unfortunately, that experiencing the miracle gets buried as we pile on all the plastic and shiny distractions.

What is it then that makes Christmas, Christmas? It’s simple really... God’s love.

I think before we can understand God’s love for us, we have to understand the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Because frankly, I shudder at the

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thought of a God who sacrifices his son so that I (someone who has blatantly disregarded the rules more times that I care to count) should get a free pass. So God takes Jesus, a really great guy, who is doing everything right, following all the rules and throws him under the bus because of something I did wrong? That’s cold!



No, when we understand the trinity, we realize that God is one God. God is God is God. It’s more than we can wrap our mind around. From the beginning of time, when we first sinned and created a rift between God’s perfect pureness and us, God made a plan to save us from this thing we created... this chasm. So God chose to become one of us. The prophets foretold how it would happen and where it would happen. God’s plan was always to be with us – to be a family – for us to inherit the kingdom. God could have very easily walked away, but perfect love doesn’t do that God offered us a greater love. God loves us perfectly.

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What God did in essence to save us was to risk everything by coming to us as 100% human while being 100% God. But, holding back his mighty power. He knew that he would experience pain and heartache, he would suffer and die so that he could end that rift that has been created by our sin.



Unfortunately, we often disregard that miracle. With all our piling on, the essence gets lost. We forget that we were lost to sin in an abyss of darkness. We let our Christmas lights and sparkly presents give us the illusion that we are our own saviors. We settle for a lesser love. Why?

There was a scientist once who came to God and said, "God, we can now clone humans, make life, and take care of ourselves... so we don't need you anymore."

God said "ok that's fine, but I want to challenge you first to a contest before I let you go. Each of us has to create our own human using nothing but dirt, and the first one done wins."

So the scientist agreed, grabbed some dirt and began forming.

But God stopped him and said, "Whoa... not so fast, go get your own dirt."

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To me, the idea that we take God out of Christmas and struggle to find love in this world is like taking oxygen out of the atmosphere and wondering why we can't breathe. God is the essence of love. Love is the essence of God.



Everything goes back to love being the root piece. Without it, nothing else is.

There are variations and levels of love. I love chocolate. I love my cat. Unfortunately in our language we are very limited. In Greek translation, there are many types of love and they each have different words. It is the *agape* kind of love which God has for us, and for which we are commanded to have for one another. Even our expression of *agape* love is but a pale example of God's *agape* love for us. When we go back to the original Greek, we find that God's intent for us it to love each other with *agape*. We struggle.

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God's love for us is sacrificial, unconditional, pure, constant and complete. Jesus is Emmanuel. God with us. This means that God came to us in human form. This meant that God, in choosing to take a human body, agreed to be born into a world full of sin, humble, dirty, poor, and vulnerable and be with us in our vast imperfection-suffering all that we suffer. The only way to break the power of sin and death was to go there himself as one of us and offer himself in our place. That is agape love. That is the kind of love that we cannot replicate with lights or gifts or lawn decorations.

We worship God, we worship the Christ child because of His love for us. THIS (baby picture). This my body and I give it to you - This - blood is my blood - shed for you. How many people would do this for you? How many rulers would do this for you?

We have a chance this Christmas to practice that agape love - the essence of Christmas - by being intentional about how we give and how we practice our traditions.

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1. One of the ways we can practice this is through practicing *presence* and *healing touch*. Did you know that the power of human touch has been scientifically proven to heal? There are many people who go sometimes days or weeks at a time without a kind touch or hug from another human being? We have the power to change that.
2. We also can show our love through our spending choices. When we do buy gifts, we can do it through scrip so that part of the proceeds go back into ministry that transforms lives. This is good stewardship.
3. Another way is through your generous gift to our end of year appeal. Half the amount will help bring people closer to God through Crossroads ministries in 2017 and the other half will help propel our United Methodist Chaplain in our area hospitals, whom you'll hear from shortly.
4. We could make a point in the coming year to offer gifts of our time and resources to those who can never pay us back.

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Agape love is an amazing thing. It's the kind of love that will always pour back into you an amount greater than you give // and will always manifest hope, joy and peace. In this picture, who is the one being blessed?

You will never regret giving this kind of love because it's the kind of love that God modeled for us when he came 2000 years ago. Where's the payoff? The payoff is when we recognize God's agape love for us.... A greater love... and then spread it into the world.

Amen.