

## Finding Love in our Differences

Luke 2:1-7

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Have you ever laughed and cried at the same time? On Tuesday night our EdgeWomen's ministry sponsored Operation Christmas Curbside as a way for us to give to four of our Go Team partners and a non-profit. Your giving was outlandish and over-the-top! Youth Hope received a bus full of Christmas presents for children. The Domestic Abuse Shelter received hundreds of hats, scarves, socks and gloves. Safe Families received over \$5,700 in donations!

On Wednesday, Pastor Dan and I had the joy of delivering toilet paper, paper towels and napkins to Christian Care, the homeless shelter in Rock Island. It was impossible for Dan to see out the back window when he was driving because the van was full to the top. Dan remarked, "*If there's a toilet paper shortage in the QCA, we now know why!*" Then he gave one of his trademark laughs. Dan's laugh is contagious, isn't it? It didn't take long for both us to start chuckling as we anticipated how Christian Care would respond. There was so much in the van it took 8 of us 20 minutes to unload!

Also, we delivered approximately 140 gift bags to Pregnancy Resources. We kept smiling and giggling the whole time because it is astonishing how giving our church is!

Here are some highlights from Tuesday night.

- A staff worker from Youth Hope brought three high schoolers to help who have been involved with this ministry since they were young. All three were saved through Youth Hope. They were just beaming as people dropped off items.
- I saw a junior higher get out of his parents' car and put \$10 in the box for Safe Families. I gave him props and asked if this was his own money. He gave me a huge grin and said it was.
- Many families had their children buy gifts for those in need. Their joyful generosity was palpable.
- I talked to one man I didn't recognize who told me he received gifts from Edgewood as a child when he was brought to church on the bus ministry. When I thanked him, he smiled and humbly said, "*This is my chance to give back.*"

- Some people brought gifts for all 5 ministries.
- Many came with trunks or backseats overflowing with items.
- One guy had the back of his pickup full of gifts.

When the deacons met that night, we prayed for each of these organizations while thanking God for the joyful generosity of God’s people at Edgewood. We also gave thanks for how God used Sheila Kuriscak and the EdgeWomen to mobilize us to live and give as missionaries on mission for His glory. After we finished, I had tears running down my cheeks.

I went home thinking about 2 Corinthians 8-9 where Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to help them see their responsibility to give to the poor in Jerusalem. Their giving was a loving expression that Jesus had torn down the walls of hostility between Jew and Gentile. Listen to verse 2: ***“For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”***

Two things characterized these Christians: abundance of joy and extreme poverty. *People don’t give when they have more money. People start giving when they have more joy!*

Verse 3 indicates, ***“For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord.”*** Amazingly, they gave what they were able to give, and they gave beyond their means because God had enlarged their capacity to be generous. When our hearts are captivated by the desire to give, God enables us to give in ways we could not have anticipated.

I’m reminded what Corrie ten Boom once said, *“The measure of a life is not its duration but its donation.”*

In verse 4, we read how the Macedonians begged to become givers: ***“Begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.”*** We generally think of the person trying to raise money as one who has to do some begging. It was the other way around with these people! They were saying, *“Please, please, let us give!”*

Edgewood is filled with people just like this! Our Financial Secretary told me several people have asked if they could direct their year-end giving to help pay down the principal on our construction and renovation loan. That’s amazing to me, but I shouldn’t be surprised. If you’d like to do the same, simply write “Grow

Time” in the memo portion of your check or select “Grow Time” from the drop-down menu if you give online. Others of us have extended our Grow Time commitments. Your continued giving will save us multiplied money in interest.

Look now at 2 Corinthians 9:7: ***“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*** The word ***“cheerful”*** comes from the Greek word *hilaros*, which denotes a happy or cheerful state of mind. Interestingly, we get *“hilarious”* from this word. God wants us to be uproarious in our giving. In the New Testament, when they took an offering, they had a blast! I’m convinced one of the reasons this is such a joyful and loving church is because Edgewood is full of people who live to give!

Notice the last part of this verse: ***“for God loves a cheerful giver.”*** When we give hilariously, we experience the love of God. God loves everyone but He’s ecstatic about those who give joyfully. The generosity on Tuesday night was so joyful many were actually laughing when they dropped off their gifts. I can only imagine how those who receive these gifts will be smiling as well.

Last weekend we were challenged to *hold on to hope when it’s hard to cope*. Our topic today is, “Finding Love in our Differences.” Behind all Edgewood’s giving is love. Love leads to giving because love is a verb.

Here’s our main idea: *God’s love gives life to others.*

We’ll begin with Luke 2 and answer the *how*, *where* and *what* questions about the love of God. We’ll conclude with John 3:16 in order to answer *why* God did what He did at Christmas.

Listen to Luke 2:1-7: ***“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”***

**1. The How: God used a pagan ruler to get Jesus to Bethlehem.** God moved in the heart of a pagan Roman emperor, who lived 1500 miles from Israel, to declare

a census for the entire world. Joseph was from the family of David, which meant he had to go to Bethlehem to register. This 90-mile journey would have taken about five days.

**2. The Where: Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill Scripture.** Listen to Micah 5:2: *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”*

Notice how precisely God orchestrated everything that first Christmas. In His sovereign love, God made sure they were in the right place at just the right time, to fulfill the Scriptures. God’s sweet sovereignty is stamped all over the nativity narrative as He weaves His eternal ways through individuals and events to accomplish His purposes.

What better place for the bread of life to be born than in Bethlehem, the “House of Bread?” Don’t miss the symbolism of the Bread of Heaven being born in a feeding trough. Jesus later said this about Himself in John 6:51: *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

*God’s love gives life to others.*

**3. The What: Christianity is an historical faith.** Our faith is based on fact, not fable or fiction. We know precisely when Jesus was born because we’re introduced to historical characters and events. Luke was a very careful historian. Both the birth and death of Christ can be established at a pinpointed time in world history. Christianity is tied to real people and real political situations because it is really real.

Let’s unpack verse 7: *“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

- **An ordinary birth.** Isn’t it interesting how Luke describes the birth so matter-of-factly? Mary just gave birth as women do.
- **A firstborn son.** She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. We know Mary had other children later. That’s why Luke says Jesus was the “firstborn” (see Matthew 12:46-47; 13:55; Mark 3:31-33; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3-10).

- **Wrapped in cloths.** Newborns were commonly wrapped tightly in strips of cloth to keep them warm and protected. This mother was lovingly caring for her child, showing us from the beginning how Jesus was just like us. The baby wrapped in “cloths” was to be a sign to the shepherds they found the right baby. I’m told shepherds would often wrap baby lambs in swaddling clothes. They were used to seeing lambs wrapped up. This reminds us of what John said when he saw Jesus in John 1:29: ***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”***
- **Placed in a manger.** The place where Jesus was born was well-known to the shepherds. This was a rough-hewn feeding trough, showing us again His humble birth. By the way, the Bible never says Jesus was born in a stable – only how He was placed in a manger after He was born. We can deduce it was in a stable (or cave) because they had mangers.

### **No Room in the Inn**

As a typical man, Joseph did not call ahead for reservations, forcing them to make other arrangements. While this was his hometown, he hadn’t been back in a long time and likely didn’t know many people there. On top of that, Mary needed a place quickly, so they looked for vacancy in an inn. These places of lodging were more like campgrounds for weary travelers, where they would spread out mats on the floor.

The innkeeper gets a lot of bad press for someone who’s not even mentioned in the Bible. He’s the scapegoat of the Christmas narrative and depicted as either the vicious villain or the busy businessman. Since Bethlehem was so close to Jerusalem, it stands to reason there was no vacancy.

In order to better understand *who* Christ is and *why* the Father sent Him to earth, turn to John 3:16. Here we will see how *God’s love gives life to others*. This verse contains deep truth, but it comes with some danger – because it’s so well known, you may nod when you hear it or just nod off. Familiarity can cause contempt, or it can breed boredom.

John 3:16 is the ultimate verse and the theme of the entire Bible.

Listen as if it’s the first time you’ve heard it: ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”***

I'm going to borrow a helpful outline from another pastor as we go through it.

- The Ultimate Declaration
- The Ultimate Demonstration
- The Ultimate Decision
- The Ultimate Deliverance

**1. The Ultimate Declaration.** Here's how the verse begins: ***“For God so loved the world...”*** The word ***“for”*** introduces a cause or clause (no, not Santa) and links this verse to what comes before. If we go back a few verses, we read during the time of Moses, the people experienced a plague of poisonous snakes as a result of provoking God. According to John 3:14-15, all they had to do was look at a pole with a bronze serpent on it and they would live: ***“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.”*** God gave them a solution for their sinfulness.

For ***“God.”*** This ultimate declaration begins with God. This is precisely where the Bible begins: ***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”*** Everything begins with God and ends with God. The sooner we realize that life is all about giving glory to God and not to ourselves, the better off we will be. It's not about you. It's all about Him.

I like the way Paul David Tripp says it in his Advent Devotional called, “Come Let us Adore Him.”

*“Jesus left His lofty place to rescue glory thieves who insert themselves into His place and make it all about them.”*

The little word ***“so”*** shows us God doesn't love a little, but a lot. The volume of His love is cranked up high. The word ***“love”*** is *agape*, which refers to an unconditional covenant kind of love, and it's a verb, meaning it's a word of action.

Notice how God loves the whole ***“world.”*** This would have been a shock to Jewish listeners who thought God loved only them. He loves refugees and the rejected; He loves the little, the least, and the lost; as well as the powerful and popular.

When the angel made his announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2:11, he said, ***“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the***

*people.*” The Christmas drama is filled with diversity as we’re introduced to upper class foreign astrologers and lower-class Jewish shepherds. The cast of Christmas characters is made up of different generations and both genders - Joseph and Mary were teens while Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna were senior citizens.

We’re sure seeing a lack of love in our culture today. It’s so easy to demonize those we disagree with, isn’t it? Sadly, many churches are dividing over masks and health protocols. Since God loves everyone, so should we.

I appreciate what Augustine had to say about disagreements and differences of opinion: *“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”*

*God’s love gives life to others.*

While you may not feel loved by others, God loves you more than you can even imagine! You matter to the Majesty! He takes great delight in you, no matter what you’ve done. He loves you no matter how you’ve been living. He treasures you in spite of all your transgressions.

**2. The Ultimate Demonstration.** The next phrase reveals how God lavishly loves us by giving the gift of His Son: *“...that He gave His only Son...”* who was wrapped in cloths when He died. The word **“gave”** has the idea of sacrifice. In this season of gift giving, don’t forget Jesus Christ is the greatest gift ever given. After celebrating the joyful generosity of God’s people, we read this in 2 Corinthians 9:15: ***“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”***

The phrase **“His only Son”** is very significant. Jesus is the *“unique, one and only”* Son. Some older translations use, **“only begotten Son.”** I’m reminded of the young boy who was trying to quote John 3:16. When he came to this part he said, **“For God so loved the world that He gave his only forgotten son...”** There’s more truth to that than he realizes – in the midst of Christmas, it’s way too easy to forget the Son.

Instead of forgetting, we’re called to put our faith in the Father’s only Son.

**3. Ultimate Decision.** While it’s helpful to know God loves and God lavishes us we also need to lean into Him: *“...that whoever believes in Him...”* Aren’t you glad the word, **“whoever”** is in this verse? God loves the whole world, which means everyone, and He offers salvation to whoever, which means you! He loves the whole mass of people and He loves me in my mess!

To **“believe”** means to, *“trust in, rely on and lean into.”* The idea is to fully surrender to the Savior, to give yourself up to Him, to take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping. Faith is believing God is who He says He is and will do what He has promised to do.

Doesn't the Bible say, *“God helps those who help themselves?”* Uh, no. That's not even in the Bible. We can't help ourselves. Our good works don't work. Being good is not good enough because no one is good enough. Actually, God helps those who *cannot* help themselves. The issue is not right behavior, but right belief. The only way for sinners to be saved is by repenting and receiving the Savior, by leaning on the Lord Jesus Christ. John 1:12 says, ***“Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”***

Unfortunately, not everyone will benefit from what Christ has done. The offer is universal, but the application is exclusive – salvation is only through Jesus Christ and is only activated for those who believe and receive Him.

*God's love gives life to others.*

**4. Ultimate Deliverance.** I love how this verse ends: ***“...should not perish but have eternal life.”*** Would you notice the only negative aspect of this verse is found in this phrase? To **“perish”** means to be eternally separated from God. Another word for this is Hell, which is a place of eternal and conscious judgment, described as a place of darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth, eternal fire, and torment.

The word **“but”** shows a contrast - we don't have to perish but instead can have **“eternal life.”** Most of us have received Christmas cards that declare, “Peace on Earth,” or “Joy to the World,” or the more secular “Seasons Greetings.” Have you ever gotten a card with this Christmas caption – “Saved from Hell?” What you do with Immanuel will determine where you spend eternity.

Let's ponder what verse 17 says: ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”*** Jesus was sent on a search and save mission. He didn't come to condemn but to convert, not to destroy but to deliver.

Listen to John 3:18: ***“Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*** This verse teaches two stunning truths.

- **If you believe in Christ, you will not be condemned**
- **If you don’t believe, you’re condemned already**

In other words, if you choose not to be saved, you are condemned right now, and you’ll be condemned in Hell forever. Do nothing and you’ll end up in Hell. That’s where everyone is headed. The only way to avoid that destination is by deliverance through faith in the Savior’s finished work. He stood in as your substitute when He paid the price for all your sins by dying in your place and rising on the third day.

I like how Matt Smethurst puts it: *“The way to escape a human’s wrath is by running from him. The way to escape God’s wrath is by running to Him.”*

If you are saved, you will not perish but instead you have eternal life. The word ***“have”*** means, *“to have and hold, to have in your hands,”* implying continued possession. John 5:24: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”***

*I am more sinful than I ever believed and more loved than I ever dared to imagine.* God gave the Living Word in order to save the world and that means whoever...and that means me and that means you.

God declares His love and demonstrates His love by the giving of His Son. When you decide to receive His gift to you, you will be delivered. *God’s love gives life to others.*

### **Action Steps**

1. As a conduit of God’s love, be intentional about giving generously and hilariously to those in need.
2. Allow God’s love to help you bear with those who bother you.
3. Give the love of God to someone who has sinned against you by forgiving them this week.
4. Repent and receive the greatest gift ever given.

The greater context of John 3:16 involves an encounter between a man named Nicodemus and Jesus. During this time of the year we could call him “Old Saint Nick,” but actually it’s better to call him “Old Sinner Nick.” He came to Jesus at night because he didn’t want any of his buddies to see he was on a spiritual search. When he finds Christ, he pays Him a compliment and is immediately jarred by what Jesus says to him in John 3:3: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”***

I first came across this verse when I was in college and was sitting in a Bible study. I ended up in this gathering because my college roommate had the courage to question my Christianity. After I blew up at Bruce, I realized he was right, which led me to this group of guys who had open Bibles on their laps. I was using a borrowed Bible and when I saw this verse in red letters, I knew it was important.

I stopped the study and told these guys I didn’t have a clue what being born again meant. They spent the rest of the time walking me through this chapter to help me see that just as I had a physical birth, which gave me life, I needed a spiritual birth to have eternal life.

After the study, I went back to my dorm room and finished reading the entire Gospel of John. Then I closed my eyes and prayed, which was probably the first prayer I ever prayed from my heart, putting my faith and trust in Christ as my substitute, leaning into the Lord as my Savior and Leader. I finally understood how much God loves me. Because I leaned on Him, I was given eternal life.

Last week we said hope has a name...hope is named Jesus.  
This week we declare love has a name...love is named Jesus.

I appreciate what Corrie ten Boom once said: *“If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.”* It’s time today to make sure Jesus is born in you.

We began by celebrating joyful generosity. When you receive the gift of Jesus, you will experience great joy and you will bring delight to God Himself.

You can do this right now by praying this prayer:

*“I don’t understand how You can accept me when I don’t measure up. Thank You for loving me so lavishly that You sent Your Son to die for my sins on the cross. I confess I am a sinner and I turn from the way I’ve been living. I need You to be my*

*Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under Your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank You for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so I can be born again. I lean into You now by faith so I can be delivered and live with You forever. Make me into the person You want me to be so I can be a conduit of Your love to others. In Jesus' name."*

Receive this benediction from Ephesians 3:17-19: ***"So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."***

9am – Kitty Israel membership (Kyle)