

Incarnational Living

John 1: 1 – 14

There's a passage in C. S. Lewis' Miracles that I always think of at Christmastime, when we're reading these wonderful Scriptures that talk about the coming of Jesus, 'God made flesh' ... Lewis writes:

"The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this..." (p. 112)

"In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.

One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great, complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too." (p. 115-116)

In the Gospel of John, we just read his introduction: John 1: 14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The central miracle of Christianity is without a doubt, the Incarnation. This is a story that has so resonated within history that our entire society *still* celebrates it for weeks on end... oh, I know that many (most?) don't understand the deeper significance of this season, but I still marvel how a baby in a manger has lead to ... all this.

We've been talking for the past three or four weeks here about something called "Radical Hospitality" – about how the most radical hospitality of all is that offered by God to each of us. How there is 'room at God's table' ... we've talked about Grace, and how God's invitation to us is

Incarnational Living

not based on our goodness, or how well we've 'put it all together'. God's table is a 'come as you are' table – or as someone once put it, "God cleans his fish after he catches them."

The point of Christmas is that God didn't come to earth just to give us a good reason to have a year-end holiday. God came for a purpose – to *find* us. Because we're lost without him. He came to forgive us, to bless us, to love us... to heal us. God came to teach us a better way to live, a way that will bring us peace, *lasting* peace, life, and hope.

So we've been talking about this concept of Radical Hospitality, and how it begins with God's invitation to us to 'come to his table'; but we've also been seeing that it then becomes our privilege to 'share' this love that we've received, that *welcome*, that grace, with others. *That* starts (as I talked about last weekend) right here in this community. It starts with 'seeing' each other as real people with real needs, hopes, hurts, quirks – the whole package. With taking off the blinders as we walk around this building. We talked then about how we're trying to be diligent to support each other, especially those with special needs (financial, emotional, spiritual) and provide a truly radical welcome to each other and to guests in this place. I hope you're getting that.

This morning, the Sunday before Christmas, I want us to think about the last piece of this puzzle. Jesus told his disciples, 'let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.' We are told again and again in the New Testament that the *very point* of having a relationship with God is so that we can 'do good works' in the name of God, and that it would be these very works that will give validity to the *words* we share about the God we've come to know in Jesus Christ.

So, it is good, and it is necessary to show God's love here *in the church*. But we haven't accomplished our mission until we break out of these walls... until we get into the community... until we are loving people who very well may not love us 'back'. Until we share God's radical hospitality with the world around us. That's our job.

And it makes a lot of sense to talk about this at Christmastime if you stop to think about it. I opened this message with C. S. Lewis' quote about the Incarnation. If you remember, that the Incarnation is the 'central miracle' of Christianity. We have a Christian 'religion' because God reached out to us,

Incarnational Living

not just attempting to ‘get to know us’, but by taking on the human condition – with all that this implies. He suffered. He loved. He was abandoned – he was tempted, and overcame it all. He ministered to people – particularly to the ‘outcasts’, the people no one cared about. He welcomed them, he touched them, he healed them, he fed them, he forgave them, he had dinner with them, he laughed with them, he partied with them at wedding receptions....

And he made a very interesting statement to his closest followers as he tried to prepare them for his coming death. He said in John 14, “*Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.*”

Think about that... the people who have faith in Jesus will “do even *greater* things... *because*” he is going back to heaven. In the Incarnation the Word – God - became human. One man. Limited in space and time. Yes, he was God, but we read in Philippians 2 that he voluntarily gave up the ‘rights of being God’ in order to accomplish his purpose for us. He lived among us as a servant, obedient even to death on a cross.

And when he conquered death, and he rose... the Holy Spirit came. And Christ Jesus then inhabits the hearts of every believer. So it is no accident that throughout the New Testament the Church is called: The BODY OF CHRIST. Think about what that means! Not just a figurative expression of a ‘gathered group’. Sometimes we’ll use the term ‘body’ in that way; meaning simply, a ‘group of people’. But what if the “BODY” of Christ referred to something much more literal? That we actually are CHRIST in the world?

And actually, that’s exactly what it means. So, of course, we can do ‘more’ than even the works that Jesus did – because the *same* power lives in us that was in Christ, and we are now... *everywhere*. I laugh when I hear people complain about how Christ is no longer ‘in the schools’, or in public arenas. Christ is in *every* Christian in every school – he is THERE.

I’ve had people say to me, “It’s really hard for me to be a believer in my home, because Jesus isn’t in my home... I’m the only one who believes.” Well then, friend, Christ *IS* there in your home. He lives in you! You ARE the Body of Christ! and God lives in the world through YOU!

Incarnational Living

Do you see what that means? Do you get what that implies?

Our faith began with the Grand Miracle: with the Incarnation. And that wasn't a one and done thing, it set the pattern, the standard for the Church from then on. We live an Incarnational Faith! Jesus is *still* among us. Jesus is *still* in the world! He lives in us! IN US!

How sad and terrible it is when we dishonor his name by being the Body of Christ but living in ways contrary to what he is, what he taught, and who we are! When we fail to love... when we fail to forgive. When we are more likely to show anger, impatience, pride, selfishness and all those human traits instead of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. May God forgive us for the times when we, his BODY, have turned our backs on needs of suffering people because we were more interested in accumulating stuff for ourselves, or because we simply didn't want to get involved.

And may God forgive us for not understanding that God is big enough to impact not only this church, but our world! Take a look at this...

[start video "Get Outside" by James Meeks].

And that's why we're trying to do the same thing... in big ways and in little ways. Some of you may have noticed over the past weeks the 'Mitten Tree' which was set up in the 1st Light / Education entryway. I thought it looked awfully full this year, so I asked the Halligan's to take a picture before they took all the items off of it over to Emergency Services. And they kindly did.

Take a look at that tree. (Pics on screen) It awesome, isn't it? Friends, there were 57 jackets, 580 mittens, gloves and hats, 4 pairs of boots, 1 blanket (and a partridge in a pear tree). That's a going to be such a blessing to so many people! We have families adopting other families from the community (as we always do), we are sending out food vouchers, children's gifts, and lots of love. This has been a wonderful Christmas.

I was sharing with someone recently about all the things that are happening in this church right now; with our outreach focus of Radical Hospitality, the new projects that are going to be happening, with the giving to the Discretionary fund, etc. and they said, "It will be interesting to see what happens *after* Christmas!"

Incarnational Living

I'll tell you, I did not relate this to Christmas, I've been relating what is going on in our church to our *mission*. My expectation is that Christmas is one way we're responding, but it's going to continue - this is going to 'snowball', and 2010 is going to be a year of ministry and outreach like we have never seen here before! I truly believe that!

What would happen if we made a continued effort to ask God to show us: what can we do to serve our communities? I had a senior citizen come to me a few months ago and said, 'You know, we have a lot of retired people here who have served in pretty near every capacity there is in this church. Lots of experience and wisdom there, a great resource. We need for you to give us something to do!'"

Well I was totally with him until that last sentence. Because that's not the way we work it here. But what if our retired/ sr. adults at FUMC started pounding on God's door asking how can I reach my peers? You know better than anyone else – what are the needs of your community? Where are the open doors for us? Pray about that and then let us (your staff, and work area chairs) help you put together some sort of ministry that will go outside these walls. There are no age limits on this vision!

And the same thing is true for baby boomers... in a world where people are overburdened, way too busy and extremely stressed, in a world where more than half of the marriages will fail, how can we *serve*? How can we make a difference? (I've put one simple way in the bulletin this week, for a couple of you – setting up, and taking down, for our Marriage Course dinners. 8 Mondays starting in January. It would take less than an hour. Simple but it will be a powerful witness). And you young people – let God lead you, how can you be Christ in *your* world?

A pastor named Mark Buchanan shared this in Leadership Journal:

A few years ago, a friend assembled a weekend work party to lay sod in his yard. The sun was shining. He had fresh coffee and cinnamon buns. And the crew he'd called together were all good friends. We liked each other immensely.

*Then Al said, "Guys, do you realize something? This is it! This is it!" We stopped.
"Al, this is what?"*

"This is community."

Incarnational Living

We all murmured our assent and congratulated one another. Yes. This is it.

But then I said, “Al, this is great, but I don’t think this is it. I like you all too much. Add a person or two to this company who lacks social graces, who looks different, who’s needy, smelly, and irritating. If we truly loved a person like that, then that would be it.”

*Silence. Then one of guys said, “Uh, Mark. We’ve accepted you, haven’t we?”
We all laughed, but they granted my point.*

We’re always tempted to turn the church into a club. With our kind of people. With a strict decorum designed to keep up appearances and keep out the, shall we say, undesirables. But Jesus said it’s no credit to us if we love those who love us—our kind of people. We don’t need God to love them; natural affinities are sufficient. But you, Jesus said, are to love the least of these and the worst of these—losers, enemies. That takes God: a supernatural subversion of our own prejudices, and a heaven-borne infusion of God’s prodigal love.

I preach that. I try to live that.

A year or so after our sod-laying party, Wanda arrived. Wanda was not our kind of people. She was thirsty alright, for beer, port, rum, vanilla extract, whatever. She had only one way to pay for that. I’ll let you guess.

But she was desperate, and thirsty for something else. She called the church one day, wondering if she could see a pastor, and now! Two of us met with her. She told us her troubled story. I told her about the woman at the well whose life, like Wanda’s, wasn’t going well. But she met Jesus and he offered her living water. I explained what living water was, and asked Wanda if she’d like some.

“Oh yeah!” she said. We prayed. She confessed, repented, surrendered. Drank deep.

The other pastor said, “Now, Wanda, this Sunday will be your first time in church. Don’t feel you have to fit in right away. You can sit at the back if you like, come late, leave early. Whatever is comfortable.”

Wanda looked at him sideways. “Why would I do that?” she said. “I’ve been waiting for this all my life.”

That Sunday, Wanda was the first to arrive. She sat at the front, and loudly agreed with everything I said. She was the last to leave. The next Sunday, same thing, except she brought a friend, one of her kind of people. I preached on servanthood. My main point: if you’ve tasted the love of Jesus, you’ll want to serve. It was Communion Sunday. In those days, we called our elders The Servant Leadership Team. I asked the Servant Leaders to come and help with Communion. That day only two of our team were in church. They straggled to the front.

*All Wanda heard was the word servant. And she had been listening intently to my sermon: if you’ve tasted the love of Jesus, you’ll want to serve.
She walked straight up to serve Communion with the other two “servants.”
I flinched.*

Incarnational Living

*Then I remembered Luke 7, Jesus' words to Simon the Pharisee as a woman, not unlike Wanda, washed Jesus' feet: "Do you see this woman?"
Do you see her?*

I leaned over to Wanda and said, "Since this is your very first time doing this, do you mind if I help?"

So Wanda and I served Communion. The best part was watching the faces of the people I love and serve and pray for and preach to.

*Not one flinched. They saw her.
This is it.¹*

¹ Mark Buchanan, "This Is It," *Leadership journal* (Spring 2008)