

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Mystical Hymns of Christmas, Part 1 *What Child Is This?*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
November 27, 2011

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1 (*Inclusive Bible*)

Our Scripture today begins with an argument. It's a little bit longer than some of the other versions of the story, but the disciples are all new Christians by definition, and they haven't yet learned the Christian art of disguising their arrogance. (*laughter*) It's so important if you're going to try to convert somebody, to look like you love them. You wouldn't want to change them if you didn't love them, but it has to look that way. They're fighting over who's the most peaceful; that's hard, you know, keeping that look and struggling over who is the most humble. These are skills that can take years to develop. (*laughter*)

But Jesus has a different plan for us; not that he always gets to vote on it. Sometimes when you get a lot of church people together, his is the voice that sometimes gets extinguished. What he does is simply a very Buddha-like thing. He takes a child, lifts it up, and says, "You want to know who's great to God, become like this...become like this child."

Now we don't have time to think of all the possible meanings this might have. You can run through that in your head – what are the traits that Jesus might have meant? Obviously not immaturity, but humility, curiosity – what are the gifts that you learn from children? We forget who we are as human beings. Simply to fit into this culture well is to forget who you are as a human being, probably. It's very, very difficult.

What the Christmas hymns are, and the reason we're going through this series is every one of them that we're using is a beautiful, deep, mystical understanding of how the sacred enters our life...or if you prefer, how love enters our life, or how God enters our life. They frame that event.

One of the early sayings in the church was, "What difference does it make if Jesus is born to Mary if Jesus isn't born *in you* at Christmas?" They're talking about an event happening *within you* at Christmas. Jesus doesn't want you to believe that he was happy and holy; Jesus wants those things for you.

I've always liked the saying by Lao Tsu, which is, "If you're looking for knowledge every day, add something. If you're looking for wisdom every day, take something away." In a sense, if what we're trying to do is return to something infant-like within us, not like an adult, it's not something you don't have. It's something that's buried beneath all the stuff that you do already have. So our task is not to search the world for the teacher or the book, or the experience, but to simply remove those things that occlude that light and that experience.

Think of it as a Christmas tree that looks down and sees all the tinsel, all the little ornaments and the lights, and can't remember what it is to be a tree. That's kind of our situation. This culture is one of the worst ever at requiring us to forget our humanity to fit in – to succeed – to get ahead.

Did you read about the woman at the Walmart? There was a great sale, and she did a very “Ayn Rand” kind of thing. She brought her pepper spray to the sale and cleared out the space around the table she was looking for. *(laughter)* Survival of the fittest. But I heard that she turned herself in, so she did come to her senses at some point. But in a way, that was bad form, but isn't that just what we teach? The Nike slogan is “Just do it.” Grab it, grab that horn. Don't think about the people that you hurt as you go after success. Certainly don't think about people outside our country that we hurt.

I had the experience of watching the Macy's Parade on Thanksgiving morning. I was with my family. I don't have cable TV, so in some ways I'd kind of forgotten how things have devolved in the culture. I'll go to give a speech or something, and I'll be in a motel looking at infomercials. I'll stay up all night. *(laughter)* I cannot believe this! *(laughter)*

It's not just religion, it's something within the human animal, and in this culture, we turn art into a competition! “Dancing with the Stars,” “American Idol,” we turn art into full combat. Remember the two ice skaters, one of whom paid somebody to [injure] the leg of her competitor? Now I don't believe that ice skating leads to violence, and I don't believe that it's really fair to say that religion leads to violence, but this competitive attitude can bring out a part of us that we're not always very happy is there.

Anyway, they had this parade, and they had the most superficial people I've ever seen announcing it. They were trying to get me really excited about Underdog again. When I stopped watching television years ago, Underdog was in the parade. But they had the news feed, describing all this horrible news that was happening in the world, running under the picture of the parade with all the joy and the ticker tape, completely oblivious of the news. And then I noticed the Army recruiting station, which is so important. If we are going to have the wealth of the world and hoard it, then you've got to have violence to support that. But don't think about that – block that out of your head. And block out the fact that the police are surrounding what you're watching, and they have their own pepper spray. You have rights, but if you ever use those rights against the rich, you may wind up with a face full of pepper spray. But don't think about that; it's the parade! Be happy!

That's kind of a downer for a beginning, isn't it? *(laughter)*

But if you look at Christmas, the story that is told is not this cheery, syrupy story; it's dark, it's cold. These kids are poor, they're rejected, and this is where the joyful gift is given. There's a joy that you will find only in the dark...only in the cold...only when you're in that place that you didn't want to get [to], and you tried as hard as you could not to get there; but if you look deeply enough into that shadow, there's light coming out. One finds this time and time again in these Christmas carols. They are trying to teach us this great gift.

In our scripture today, when Jesus lifts up the child, the first thing he's trying to teach us is to see that infant face within ourselves. When you look at an infant's face, and you see that light coming out, it's really easy to see the Sacred. But when you look at the same infant forty years later, it's hard to see that...but it's there. At Christmas one of the things that fills us with joy with these hymns is that we stop looking in the wrong place for maybe five minutes, and look at the right place. Christmas is the one time of the year when the symbols work. We need to go deeply into that, and spread it across the whole year, because the symbols can work if we understand them in the right way. But at Christmas, they just *do*.

Henri Nouwen was someone who had a great sense of this. Here's what he is saying about going inside yourself, not pretending to be what you're not, taking away things and seeing that light that's there inside you.

“To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.”

When you strip away all the things that you're not, you come to this awareness deep inside of you, this mysterious, miraculous light that is coming out of the depth that you don't know. The Christmas hymns are calling you to that light. To get them, you don't have to search for them, you have to get still. You have to stop searching for everything else, and let this come from the inside. What you have to realize is that you're not that bad thing you did, you're not that dumb thing you said. *You're not that bad thing you did; you're not that dumb thing you said.* The Christmas carol says it so well.

“What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?”

What child is this? It's a question. It's not a religious answer. It's a wondering look at a child that represents something deep within every one of us. If Jesus was just coming to *teach us about himself*, he didn't do a very good job. A lot of the details were left out. But if he was coming to *teach us who we are*, then the job is perfect. But we have to know that.

He was born in a cattle stall! I love Luther's treatment of Christmas. He says, “All of the rich, important, powerful and religious people had gathered in Jerusalem for the coming of the Messiah, and Christ was born thirteen miles away in a cattle stall!” It was in the cold, to shivering children, and observed by shepherds, of all people.

You're not that bad thing you did; you're not that dumb thing you said. You put all that aside and see the child's face, the infant face, and then they say, “What was your face before you were born?” This is maybe more practical. It's saying, “Picture yourself as that infant that you used to be. It's not gone. That innocent awareness is underneath all the other things that make you unhappy, that make you afraid. So Jesus lifts up a child and says, ‘Become this again.’”

The second thing he does is a little harder for me, anyway. It may not be harder for you. He lifts up the baby and says, “Receive other people like this.” You see, that's a sucker punch. We have to see the infant face *in each other*. I have to realize that you're not that bad thing you did; you're not that dumb thing you said. You never count on that when you begin the spiritual journey.

Now let me do the caveat that you always have to do. This isn't saying to put up with abuse. This isn't saying to stay in relationships that are harmful to you. But it is to say, “Let go of the bitterness and the pain of things that happened a long time ago.” It's healing. This is not you being righteous, this is you healing, and letting go when you can. You can't right away. But when you can, letting it go.

We have false identities that wound us. Things we're trying to be that we're not, really...success, glory; and we get confused; we lose that inner light, because we want to be what people think we are. We want to get to some place that we're not.

Have you ever met one of the people who want to maintain their Confederate heritage? They say they're not racist, but if you take what's left other than that - you like dressing in grey - and what else? *(laughter)* On my Facebook page there was a guy who was wanting to be friends and I looked at the different groups he was involved in, and one of them was "Skinheads Against Hate." *(laughter)* Skinheads Against Hate. Now I was trying to make sense of that. I mean, if you don't hate anybody, are you really a Skinhead? Or are you just a guy with a burr [haircut]? *(laughter)*

We hold onto identities – being an American, being a Christian, being successful – and none of those things are bad in and of themselves, but they can crowd out who you really are, and what really makes life joyful, and what really makes you feel your own importance.

The Christmas hymn text we're using today, "What Child Is This?" dates back into the nineteenth century. When you go back to these original hymns, you find that they were a pretty tough group of people back then. One of the verses that that we wisely cut out of the original version of this hymn goes like this:

"Good Christians fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you."

Now that just puts you in a Christmas mood, doesn't it? *(laughter)*

But understand what the poet is trying to do. The poet isn't trying to make you feel guilt that you didn't have. The poet is specifically speaking to people who feel the guilt already. The symbol of sin is a symbol of a love that doesn't give up on you because of some horrible thing that you feel that you've done. "Good Christians fear..." have awe, have reverence – "for sinners here the silent Word is pleading." That's not a judge making you feel bad. That's somebody trying to reach through your depression, through your shame and realize that you have worth and goodness and beauty; that that light is not invisible to God.

But we have to remind ourselves that when people have hurt us – and that's what love does – if you live with somebody long enough, that you have to separate. That's not saying that you have to stay in a dangerous situation, but everybody's going to hurt you at some point...everybody. We're mammals. We are mammals; we do what we can do. But at some point, we do things that are unforgiveable, and if we're going to have relationships, we have to get past it.

So you begin with yourself; I'm not that dumb thing I said, I'm not that terrible thing I did. Then go on to the person you love; you can get to Hitler later. Don't start with Hitler or Saddam Hussein. Work your way up. Start with the people you're trying to love even if it gets sabotaged because you can't let go of something. Say, "They're not that terrible thing they did, they're not that dumb thing they said; they are the light, the infant face behind it all."

Here's how Nouwen says it:

“Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken.”

Sounds like us, too, doesn't it?

“But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it.”

At Christmas we remember something deeper about ourselves and about each other. Our passage begins with a fight, because that's sometimes where these lessons begin. A family quarrel - somebody disappointed, somebody hurt, somebody mad. It's calling us not to be fooled by each other's disguises, to not be fooled by each other's wounds, but to go deeper into that love that we want. To hold onto it, we have to let go of other things. If you want knowledge, keep piling stuff up. If you want wisdom, if you want love, you've got to let go.

This is the story of how love enters our life, or how the sacred enters our life...or how God enters our life – use your own images or metaphors for it. But it is a very, very important lesson, and the way Jesus taught it was to lift up a kid to those quarreling people and say, “If you want to find your way back to happiness and peace, do this. Just glow. Do what the baby's doing.”

Now look at that person who you love, and you know you love, but you don't feel it right now, and do that, too. Look for that light. You fell in love with that person, maybe you married them; it's still got to be there somewhere. But what it's saying is this: When we can remember that, when we can know that we're not that dumb thing we said, we're not the terrible thing we did; when we can see that infant face in ourselves and in each other, it is Christmas the year around.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



St. Andrew's Church

14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 · (512) 251-0698 · Fax: (512) 251-2617
www.staopen.com

Loving ♦ Progressive ♦ Presbyterian