

Matthew 1.18-25; 1 John 4.7-16
Christmas Eve Divine Service
24 December 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord, on this most holy of nights: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is definitely an ethical entailment of Christmas.

Jolly Old St. Nick certainly embodies it.

Not the Santa of modern lore, of course. But the St. Nicholas whose feast day is observed on the 6th of December. He was the Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Renowned—and later canonized—for his kind and loving generosity toward the poor, especially toward children. “Beloved, let us love one another,” John writes. St. Nicholas of Myra lived a life of love toward neighbor.

Unfortunately, though, the popular imagination has shrunk Christmas down to that ethical entailment and nothing more. It is, so Dickens, the season for generosity and merriment. The “season for giving.” Scrooges not allowed.

But in theology everything has its proper place. Love and works follow faith, they don't precede it. And faith follows the forgiveness of sins, and not the other way around. That's John's point tonight: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

So on this Christmas Eve, let's get it right.

You see, this “spirit of the season” business, this “'tis the time for giving” line that's so common, well, it emerges from a deep sense that something's not right. The world's broken.

The world's broken, so let's fix it. Poor children are raised in abject poverty because of their parents' addiction to drugs. Let's fix it. Families are stricken by the most horrific stuff—cancer out of the blue. Let's give them gifts. Let's fix it.

And so we roll up our sleeves and get to work.

But even as we do that we find out that something else is broken. Us. Me. I'm broken. If it weren't so I'd be involved in my destitute neighbor's care with all-in generosity not just once a year, but every day. And I find out very quickly that my improvement plan isn't just for the world around me, but even for me. The world's broken. But it's broken—at least in part, I'm not sayin' it's all my fault—because I'm broken.

But here's the good thing. I can become less broken. I can even prove it to myself! I can do good things for others. I actually can! It might hit the bank account a little hard. But I'll get over it. I can be generous. I can do really good things. For others. Even for strangers. Even for people who'll never know it was me who did it. Even when no one's looking.

You know the feeling, don't you? I sure do. And it feels good.

And I can guarantee you there's not a single soul in the entire world who doesn't know the same exact feeling. Even Scrooge. It feels good to do good! Even when no one's looking. (Although, if they happen to be looking that's okay, too.)

But let me let you in a little secret about why it feels so good.

It feels so good because much more hangs in the balance for you than helping your neighbor. I'm not saying that you can't be moved by genuine pity for your neighbor and do something really astonishingly good for her. But what I am saying is that it feels so good to you for another reason. And not just you. But everyone in the whole world.

You see, you live in this really horrible place. You live before God. What makes you feel good when you do good and no one sees it is that you know God does. That's even what makes you feel good when you do good and people *do* see you. Their approval must somehow be a leak from the divine echo chamber where the Almighty, All-Just, All-Holy, All-Knowing, All-Seeing God is now approving, now disapproving of what you do. Even approving and disapproving of *you*.

But this is exactly where things take a really nasty turn. You know God wants works of love toward neighbor. It's just that your works toward neighbor aren't exactly love toward neighbor. At all. It turns out they're actually love toward self. It turns out that they're actually not about helping neighbor. They're about helping you. Helping you stand before the God who approves and disapproves of what you do. Who approves and disapproves even of you. And on whose approval or disapproval hangs everything. Blessing or curse in this life and the next.

You know the feeling, don't you? I sure do.

And I hate it.

I hate it because standing on my tippytoes to do my scotch best, to have the Almighty, All-Just, All-Holy, All-Knowing, All-Seeing God say to me now and in eternity, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" I hate it because even when and maybe especially when I'm doing my scotch best, I'm actually in the pit of hell! I've turned the Almighty, All-Just, All-Holy, All-Knowing, All-Seeing God into a marionette I can manipulate. A finger puppet who smiles back when prompted by me. The Creator turned by the creature into its own creature, even as I the creature control Him as if He were my own creation. In other words, even when I'm doing my scotch-best, and especially when I'm doing my scotch-best, I find that I've sinned against the first and cardinal commandment, the one on which all others hang, the one which failing fulfillment nullifies any good done, any evil avoided. And it turns out that my pursuit of the "ethical entailment of Christmas" is nothing but sin.

But hear again these words of tonight's Gospel. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus. For He will save His people from their sins."

He will save His people from their sins! Not me! God Himself, God-with-Us God, descends from heaven. He heals what I cannot heal. He heals what you cannot heal. He saves me from what I cannot escape. He saves you from what you cannot escape.

And your sins? Even and especially those ones that have all the shine and glamour of doing good, those ones that are so wretchedly horrible that they diminish God to your plaything? You know what He does with them?

He forgives them. He takes the loan ledger and rips it up. In His own blood He composes a letter to you. This is how it reads.

τετέλεσται. The bill's paid. In full. Your sins are not counted against you. Your salvation isn't a personal self-improvement plan. It's the forgiveness of your every attempt at self-improvement. My approval of you isn't based on your track record, but Mine. And you are approved. You are forgiven. You are justified. You are saved. You owe Me nothing. For I have paid it. You are not in arrears. For the bill is wiped out. You don't even have a late payment. Because the account your forgiveness is paid out of is infinite. The infinite merits of Me, the infinite God who became flesh for you in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. Whose life from conception to death was without sin and yet who, though without sin, became sin for you so that you might be made the righteousness of God in Me. And you are saved. You are free. Free from the curse of the Law. Free from all your posturing.

Sincerely, in great love for you,

Christ

That, beloved in the Lord—that is the Gospel. That's the good news that the angels announced the night of Christ's birth: that in a manger, in Bethlehem, lay the Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord in whose name alone is our help, the Lord *who forgives sins*.

So let's go back to where we started.

There is an ethical entailment of Christmas. God is love. In the manger in Bethlehem you see His love. He gives His Son into the flesh to bear your sin. To die for your sin. To rise from the DEAD to give you everlasting LIFE. To give you approval before God. Redemption. Holiness. All of it. A gift. A gift of His great love toward sinners.

And now, guess what.

That horrible position everyone in the world is in? Standing before God?

Well, for you who are in Christ, for those who cling to Him and Him alone for their approval before God, their justification, their righteousness—you look to the manger in Bethlehem and all doubt about your standing is erased. For the one who lies there is named Jesus. He saves His people from their sins. God does not judge you by His Law. But by His Son. He doesn't approve you by His Law. He approves you by His Son. And that approval has already taken place: look at manger, cross, empty grave.

And now the terrible burden is lifted. No self-posturing before God necessary! God doesn't need your works. Turns out He never did.

But your neighbor does.

So give them. Give them freely. Give them freed from the terrible burden that your standing before God depends on them. It doesn't. It depends on Christ.

So give them. And let them only please your neighbor. Let them only be for your neighbor's good. There's nothing beyond that. No ulterior goal. You won't fix a broken world. Christ has already done that. And you not gonna fix broken you, either. Christ has already done that, too.

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God has so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Abide in His love toward you. Fix your eyes not on the good you do. Not on the good you are. Fix them on Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfecter of your salvation. And the good that you would—for your neighbor's sake? That will follow.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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