

“Christmas Through Other Eyes,”

11 December 2005

(Advent 3)

Bible passage: **Matthew 25:35-36** (*The Message*)

Jesus said, “When I was hungry, you fed me.

I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.

I was homeless and you gave me a room.

I was shivering and you gave me clothes.

I was sick and you stopped to visit.

I was in prison and you came to me.”

Sermon nugget: What does it mean to see Christmas through eyes other than our own?

When we first started thinking about the service for today, we thought it would be a good idea, since we’re living in such a global world now, that we become aware of the many different kinds of traditions for Christmas that are practiced in different countries. Now, from my days of teaching French, I knew a bit about how people there do it, and it’s quite different from what we typically do here.

For instance, on Christmas Eve, children leave their shoes by the fireplace, rather than hanging stockings “by the chimney with care.” They are hopeful that when they awaken the next morning, that Pere Noel will have visited, and filled those shoes with gifts, along with some sweets, fruit, nuts.

A nativity scene or crèche is in almost every French home. In fact, one of my favorite Nativities is the one I bought in a little town in the south of France, and I brought it today for you to see. It’s pretty typical of what one would see there. Along with Mary and Joseph, the baby, the shepherds, and a few animals, there are often little clay figures that are called “santons” (little saints). Those are like the man and woman sitting on the steps of the house, the baker with his sack of flour, the local priest, and woman carrying firewood, etc. They represent normal people in the towns and villages.

One thing I remember most from my teaching days is that the Christmas tree is not a big deal there, nor is the Yule log that used to be quite common. However, some of that tradition has carried on with the baking of a log-shaped cake that’s called a “buche de Noel.” It’s a thin chocolate layer of cake, filled with whipped cream and nuts, and then rolled into a log shape, and iced with chocolate icing. I used to make a bundle of them each year at Christmas for my French classes!

Obviously each and every country has its own customs and holiday traditions. It probably seems a bit unusual for us to think about those in the Southern Hemisphere celebrating Christmas in the heat of summer, but that’s what they do. Many in Australia flock to the beaches for the day, and their version of Santa just might arrive on a surfboard!

I was thinking about all this when I was walking the other day, and something occurred to

me. Yes, of course, Christmas is celebrated differently from one culture to the next, but it's also celebrated differently among us, and this year it may be even more different. Think what has happened within the last year...we had the tsunami that snuffed out hundreds of thousands of lives, the hurricanes that destroyed much of our Gulf coast and parts of Florida, the deadly earthquake that claimed so many lives just in October, and now the tornadoes that raced through the southern part of Indiana, killing 23 people, and destroying hundreds of home.

For all those directly affected, Christmas will be different this year. For all of those who have suffered such loss and destruction, the holiday season will be seen with totally different eyes. Everything has changed for so many people in the world.

I think it might be a good idea for each of us to consider what it would be like to see Christmas through their eyes. If we genuinely try to look through the experiences of others, we will see a totally different perspective of Christmas. For example, last Christmas, we were probably thinking about all the things we didn't have, but this year, we may be more grateful for what we do have. Last year, we were counting our money, but this year we're counting our blessings. Last year we were trying not to let annoying relatives get the best of us, and this year we're trying to give the best of ourselves to them. Do you see? When we look through the eyes of those whose lives have been so dramatically changed by all these disasters, we will see things quite differently.

But, you know, even without such disasters, there are many right here in our midst who see and experience Christmas through a different set of eyes. Those who are hungry, homeless, jobless, broken in body and spirit must certainly experience this season in a far different way from most of us sitting here this morning. If we look through those eyes, we will see differently, and we can see what Jesus said about helping those who struggle with the basics of life. That's what he's talking about in the the Bible passage that we have for today. Our version reads like this:

"I was hungry, you fed me.

I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.

I was homeless and you gave me a room.

I was shivering and you gave me clothes.

I was sick and you stopped to visit.

I was in prison and you came to me."

In short, Jesus was asking us to look through a different set of eyes, and to see the plight of others in a totally new ways. Jesus wanted us to look with eyes of compassion, eyes of love, eyes of caring. When we see Christmas through the eyes of others, we see something very different from when we just look through our own tinted lenses. We see hurt and pain and sorrow and hunger and homelessness, and when we look through those eyes, we see all of the Christmas season far differently than ever before.

You see, when Jesus was questioned about when he was ever hungry or thirsty or homeless or in prison, he gave his followers an answer that was rather surprising to them. He said, "Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me." Whenever we look toward the margins of society, we see those Jesus was talking about, and whenever we reach out a hand to help, we are God's hands of love in this world.

But, you know, sometimes the easy thing for us to do is to give a hand to those whose suffering is so obvious. It may be more difficult to look at those closest to us and see things through their eyes. Dorothy Day, in her "Meditations," commented on this very thing. She wrote, "It is not love in the abstract that counts." She elaborated on that thought, and in a McCoy rephrasing said, "People have loved the workers, the poor, the oppressed, but they have not loved in a real human way. They have not loved 'personally.'" And she closed by saying, again in a re-phrased version, "It is never those right next to us, but those in the abstract that are easy to love."

The email with those words came to me as I was beginning to work on this message, and they really struck me. How right she was! That caused me to wonder what Jesus would say today, if he were observing today's world, about loving closely, rather than abstractly. It seems that I'm in a re-writing mood, because it came to me on a morning walk how he might say the words of our

Bible passage. In the "Gospel according to McCoy," Jesus might well say this:

"When I told you I was gay, you accepted me."

When I told you I was HIV positive, you helped me find treatment.

When I told you I was struggling with addiction, you understood.

When I told you about the death of my loved one, you hugged me.

When I told you a hurricane had destroyed my home, you gave me a place to stay,

When I told you I hadn't had a solid meal in days, you brought me something to eat.

When I told you I was alone, you invited me in.

When I told you I lost my job, you helped me find worth and dignity again.

When I told you I was so depressed about life, you stood by me.

When I told you how I'd hurt you, you began to forgive.

When I told you how empty I felt inside, you showed me God."

"Remember," Jesus said, "whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked, ignored, maligned, or forgotten, you did it to me."

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us will see Christmas this year through a new set of eyes—eyes filled with compassion, care and love.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen