

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2024  
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft

9This is how God’s love for us was revealed: God has sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that we may live through him. 10This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Dear friends, if God loved us so much, we also should love one another. 12No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love has been brought to its goal in us. 13This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. – 1 John 4:9-14 EHV

On Christmas Day, the family gathers at grandma’s house. The children play with their new toys. The adults share old memories. Grandpa sleeps on the recliner having been worn out by the day’s festivities. In this cozy home, they can certainly feel the love.

On the drive home, the dad looks through the rearview mirror to see his children fast asleep. One of his kids is even cuddled up next to a new stuffed animal. As he drives through the dark night, his wife sits next to him flipping through photos of the day’s festivities on her phone. In this car, they can certainly feel the love.

Back home, dad carries his little kids out of the car and places them in bed. His wife went through the house to turn the Christmas lights on. They are worn out from a full day, but they are resting on the couch now. Both dressed in their Christmas pajamas in which the family photos were taken this morning, they put a classic Christmas movie on the TV. It may seem quaint, but this family can certainly feel the love.

This is the Christmas we all dream about, right? Families gathering for festive fun, toddlers thankfully playing with their new treasures, couples cuddled in a cozy home; these are the joys of Christmas that we all want to experience. This is our picture of Christmas love.

Is this picture accurate though? Is this how Christmas love is truly experienced? So often it seems to be that this desired Christmas love is not experienced to the desired level. At the family gathering, Uncle John’s conversation was so lively because he drank more than he should have. As a man who never found the family life he wanted, Christmas gatherings were not happy times for him. Then, his overdrinking made the gathering difficult for everyone around him.

On the drive home, the child may have been sleeping cuddled next to the gift, but it wasn’t originally received well. You see, the young boy got a nice new stuffed animal, but his brother’s seemed better to him. This gift was originally received with many tears and a tantrum.

Back home, the couple may be sitting on the couch watching a screen together, but in their hands are the little screens that take their attention away. The husband and wife are there together, but mentally they are so separated. The wife scrolls through social media dreaming of what her life would be if certain events in life happened differently. The husband scrolls mindlessly through video clips to escape the pain of a less than satisfying life.

It turns out that Christmas love was not truly felt by this family. On the exterior, everything looked good. Yet, this was simply a façade. This Christmas celebration left the family wanting more. They yearned for more. They were longingly asking the question: where shall we find Christmas love?

Today's text for consideration tells us where Christmas love shall be found. Such love is found in an unexpected place. Such love is not found in family, traditions, or other such things. Let's dig into the text to disclose the answer to our question: where shall we find Christmas love?

As we approach this question, it would be important for us to define love. What is love? Let us not fall into the false thinking of our society that love is all about emotions. Love is not simply how you feel about a person or situation. Love is an action word. People show love for one another by doing things for them. So when we look for a true experience of love during Christmas time. Let us not be misled by our hearts that true love is all about how we feel. No, love is seen in action.

The key to resolution for our question is given to us right away by God through the hand of John. We are told that love was revealed when God sent his only-begotten Son into the world. To consider this further, we can travel back in time 2,000 years to when this happened. Moved by his love, God the Father sent His Son to live in this world. The Virgin Mary conceived a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, in Bethlehem, she gave birth to this child who was the Son of God taken flesh. She named him Jesus. She wrapped him in swaddling cloths. She placed him in a manger.

What a strange place for God to come? A little known town called Bethlehem is where he was born. A seemingly unimportant woman named Mary was his mother. A birth that seemed so insignificant that he was placed to lie in manger as his family stayed in a barn.

Yes, the birth of the only-begotten Son of God may seem to have been in an unexpected way and place, but this was all as God had said it would happen. *"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law."* (Galatians 4:4-5) This is the immense demonstration of God's love. God sent his Son to save people from the consequence of their sins. God sent his Son so that they would be with him forever in heaven.

In this text, John tells the reader that love starts with God. Humans are capable of showing love. They can show love to God, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They can show love to one another to honor God. Yet, human will and action is not the beginning of this love. Love starts with God.

On the first Christmas, God demonstrated his love in this way: he sent his Son to be the Savior. People had tarnished relationships with God. Yet, God took flesh to dwell among us. People cannot see God, yet in Christ, the invisible God is seen.

This is the astounding love of God. People could not come to God. People could not truly love God. People could not truly love one another. So, God took it upon himself to come for them. Where shall we find Christmas love? In the person of Christ Jesus our Lord. He is where we shall find the love that we desire to receive.

This love is what can be testified to you today. This love is what you need. This love is what fills empty longings and desires. This is what we share: God sent his only-begotten Son to be your Savior.

Now, moved by the love that God has shown in Christ Jesus, humans show love to God by loving one another. Those who remain in God's love will certainly do this. Motivated by the fact that God came into the world, Christians will love one another and the world in action. They will share the love of Christmas that was shown to them.

The greatest demonstration of love that a Christian can show to another person is sharing with that person the truth of what God has done to share his love with them. Motivated by God's love, Christians will love others by pointing them to God's love. They will help others answer the question: where shall

we find Christmas love? They will give the answer by pointing to the manger... and the cross... and the empty tomb. They will give the answer by sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit, through the hand of John, shows that love is found in an unexpected place, a manger. Is this where you go to find the love that you desire at Christmas time? Many do not.

Many start with the wrong definition of love. Instead of defining love in action, they define love in emotion. Then they become moved by and motivated by their feelings. They start to become preoccupied with questions like: What makes me happy? What makes me feel good? What feels right? Through this emotional-centric valuation of love, they are led astray. They are led away from the true experiences of love. They are led toward self. They are led toward solutions that will not solve. They are led toward experiences of emotional happiness which will fade. They are led toward dissatisfaction and frustration.

Many go to the wrong places to experience love. Instead of recognizing that love starts with God, they go first to human expressions of love. They look for the love that will satisfy all desires from their spouse; children; friends; or a stranger met online. Human love will not fulfill though. When people go to the wrong source for love, they are led to disappointment.

Do not be misled to believe that fulfilling love is found in such places. Do not watch the Hallmark movies, the Christmas specials, and the social media clips that will lead you to believe that the love you desire this Christmas is found in people, things, or your own feelings.

Where shall you find Christmas love? You will not find it in receiving a gift. You will not find it in the drink at home. You will not find it in the arms of your spouse or children. All such sources of love will not truly satisfy. All such sources of love may not last forever.

Where shall you find Christmas love? Lying in a manger. Held in the arms of a virgin mother. Wrapped in swaddling cloths. Living in a small town called Bethlehem. Love is shown to you in the person of Christ Jesus. Jesus was born for you. Jesus lived the perfect life that you could not live. Jesus died on the cross the death that you deserved. Jesus did all this so that he could save you. Jesus did all this so that you would be brought to eternal bliss in heaven.

Love is action, not simply emotion. God loved you so much that he sent his only-begotten Son to save you. Now, this love moves you to action as well. You can be moved to show the love of Jesus with others. You can share the love of Christmas with others. You can do this by volunteering to help those in need. You can do this by giving gifts to your family members. You can do this by spending time with the lonely.

The love of God in Christ Jesus will actually fix your approach to the holidays and your mindset about it. When you go to the family get together, guilt or shame about where you are in life as opposed to your family's expectations can be let go of. Maybe you won't get dad's approval, but God the Father has an unquestionable love for you. Maybe as a child, some of the gifts you receive will disappoint you, but your Heavenly Father has given you the greatest gift you could ever receive. Maybe your house and life feel less than satisfying, but God's love can truly satisfy as he gives you an eternal home with him and everlasting life.

God's love sets you free from the dissatisfaction of this world. God's love sets you free from guilt. God's love sets you free from all the problems that hinder you from feeling loved at Christmas time. Since God has set you free, you are not free to truly love. You are free to embrace all the things that you do in this season and life as ways to respond to his love.

The question that many ask around this time is where shall we find Christmas love? The Holy Spirit directed our eyes away from our emotions and expectations of other people. Then, he directs our eyes to an unlikely place. He pointed our eyes to the manger in Bethlehem. He pointed our eyes to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. That is where we shall find love. Amen.