

“Claiming our True Identity” – Sermon for Zion Mennonite Church
December 28, 2014 – Jennifer Lyn Gingerich

Texts: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7

Jesus has been born! All our waiting in the season of Advent has culminated in Jesus’ humble birth. Our savior is born! We have been given the ultimate gift of love: God’s incarnation – the coming of God in human form through Jesus – and today is a Sunday of celebration and joy! We celebrate the birth of one born over 2000 years ago: a birth that promised restoration, peace to all people, and justice for the oppressed. God dwells among us for all time, and we are named as God’s children and heirs. That is our true identity: we are God’s beloved children and we will receive the promised inheritance of redemption.

And yet the world is torn apart by pain and grief. Sometimes we find it difficult to celebrate in the midst of the pain we experience in our own lives and the devastation we witness around us. We thought this Messiah was to bring hope, peace, joy and love; but we live amidst greed, hatred, envy, murder, war, abuse, and every kind of injustice. We are even sometimes part of perpetrating these wrongs. Where is the hope amid such suffering and sin?

I admit that sometimes I long for a different Messiah.... One who will come and fix it all suddenly and bring the idyllic peaceable kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb and all will be well forever and ever amen. The Hebrew people certainly hoped for that Messiah and thought that’s who they would get – not this vulnerable baby born in a barn... how disappointing.

And yet, when I realize how amazing this gift of Love incarnate is, I wouldn’t have it any other way. Love came down at Christmas, a traditional hymn states it. And it’s true. Love is what was born in that stable. Hope is what comes from that birth. This is where true Joy lies, and Peace within and all around us will be the byproduct of that Love.

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In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is trying to explain to the people of Galatia that through Christ, they have received the gift of God’s amazing love and grace. Through Jesus, we are all made beloved Children of God – adopted as if God’s own flesh and blood, and made to inherit the promise that God made to Abraham: we are now recipients of God’s salvation, redemption, and liberation. And the real kicker is that it’s there, for us all. The love is unfathomable, for all people in all times, and there is nothing we need to do to get it. It’s just there. It’s for you. It’s for me. It’s for every person we meet. Amen!

Now for whatever reason, it can be hard, at least for me, to conceptualize and accept God’s love. Perhaps it’s difficult for you as well. Maybe it’s because we are brought up in a world where everything we do is judged, evaluated, graded, assessed, etc. It’s hard to conceptualize a gift freely given, not to be earned, because the context we live in tells us that we have to work to receive, and earn our way. Maybe we’re just too stressed, too busy, too preoccupied with success or even simple survival or shame.

God’s way is different than the way of our world: this love is simply there for us. In Romans 8 we read that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from God’s love. The entire New Testament is filled with examples of how God’s love is not for the earning but simply given. Jesus is the proof of this- the ultimate expression of God’s love for us because God became incarnate – God became embodied in human form. In flesh. God dwelt among us and dwells among us still. All because of this tiny baby born out of love and willing to be vulnerable to all elements of life that we experience. The pain and the pleasure, the grief and the joy, the greed and the generosity, the hate and the love. God experiences it all alongside us, and in spite of it all promises a better way and shows us a better

way through the life of Jesus. This is the good news for us! We are not alone, and we have One who has gone before us to show us the way of love.

One thing that made Jesus different from many humans is that he lived into his beloved nature, choosing the way of love over and over and over again regardless of the cost of that choice. By opening himself to love, Jesus lived a full life even for how short his life was. Jesus’s acceptance of his true identity as child of God, beloved of God, allowed him to live into and out of that Love. Through living in love he spread Hope, Peace, Joy and Love to all whom he met. Love breeds more love.

We too are invited into this way of living. This love is abundant for us. We don’t earn it. Our annual evaluation doesn’t land us with lumps of coal if we’re naughty or shining diamonds if we’re nice. There *is* no annual evaluation: simply this gift freely given of love. It’s terrifyingly foreign and incomprehensible. What do we fear of this love?

I suspect we fear it will run out, or that as good Mennonites if we accept that we’re loved we’ll somehow fall onto the slippery slope of arrogance, pride&greed. Perhaps we fear we will be taking love away from others. We fear that love has limits and that we might wear it down and dry up the well from whence it came.

It’s like a woman who received a bottle of very expensive perfume. It was a gift from her spouse, and it was her absolute favorite fragrance. The scent was full but subtle, and it was the woman’s prized possession. She would sometimes take it out and smell it, but never wore it. The woman kept saving it for just the right occasion. The woman died suddenly, having never worn her prized perfume. She and her partner never got to enjoy that fragrance together. It was sadly kept bottled, and never shared.

God’s love is like a never-emptying bottle of prized perfume. God’s love will never dry up, and the well is deeper than all eternity. I love the words of the familiar hymn “The love of God: It’s greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.” Will we risk the lavishness of wearing that incredible fragrance of love daily?

When we open ourselves to this incredible love, it spreads. It fills us, and overflows out of us to others. It’s always there for the receiving, for all people. But we forget how to love because of the woundedness of our world. We are scared to love because it makes us vulnerable. Release that fear. Embrace the love of God embodied in Jesus for all people. With each opening to this love, there is more love waiting for us. We can receive more love. Not more than someone else or more than there was before... The love has always been there and will always be there and will never end. We experience more love because it’s more than we previously realized or imagined. In receiving this love, we can more fully live into who we have been created to be. In receiving this love, we share it more freely. In receiving this love, we claim our true identity as heirs of God.

Jesus was blessed into his true identity as an heir of God as a baby in the temple. Mary and Joseph took him there as was customary, and he was blessed by an ordinary man Simeon. Imagine what Simeon must have felt holding this tiny vulnerable baby that he knew would grow to become the hope of the world. That combination of hope in the midst of vulnerability is something that mothers of newborns know well. The incomprehensible love a parent feels for their child is an echo of the love our parent God feels for us.

Now imagine yourself as the baby. Can you imagine that love for yourself? You are precious, sacred, a beloved child of God and heir to the kingdom of God. What a gift we are all given at Christmas. A baby has been born who will bring justice to the oppressed, release to the captives, and peace to the brokenhearted. The incarnation of God is within and all around us. Do you see it?

Many of us were blessed and dedicated as babies into the care and nurture of the church because our parents presented us for this blessing as Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple. Many of us also chose baptism as a sign of our commitment to following Jesus. Whether we have been dedicated or not, baptized or not, we are all invited to claim the blessing and love of God. After our response song you will all be invited for anointing: no matter your age you are all invited to receive this tangible, physical symbol of God’s love for you.

This is how the anointing time will work. I’m going to explain it now so that we can flow immediately from our response song into the time of anointing. Julie Yoder, Lynn Miller, Mathew Swora and I will be positioned in the front and back of the church to offer anointing. The front and back rows will begin first, the front rows filing toward the center and moving forward toward Mathew and I and then head back around the benches to your seats, and the next rows will follow. Same in the back: the back rows will file to the center and then move around the back of the pews and file back into place, and then the next rows, and so-on. Again, anyone who would like to is welcome to receive anointing. If you prefer to have your hand anointed rather than your forehead, please make that known to whoever is anointing you by simply offering your hand. And in case you are fragrance sensitive, don’t worry. We are not using fragrant oil.

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Before we do the anointing, we will sing our response hymn, which is actually a combination of two hymns that tell us about who Jesus is. Kari Ferguson will be singing one of the hymns, which is from the Sing the Story hymnal supplement that you all do not have. Listen closely to the words of this hymn. Kari will sing it for us again as we receive anointing. After we finish singing the last verse, those of us offering the anointing will get in place, and the song will start over again with Kari singing. At that point anyone interested in receiving anointing can begin to move toward the anointers.

So come and wear the fragrance of Love, and trust that the love will never run out.