

A Sermon Preached on December 23,
2018, at Bethany Beach Christian
Church, Bethany Beach, DE

We're almost there! Just another day and we'll gather (well, some of us will) tomorrow evening for a Christmas Eve service. Others will be dining or partying with friends as we anticipate the reason for the season: the birth of the Christ child. It is many things if not that, but as the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti etched out one night on her writing pad, "Love came down at Christmas." So we are just about complete now. The four weeks of Advent took us from Hope to Peace to Joy; and today we celebrate Love in final preparation for the day of the great Creation, the Incarnation, the

day that God takes on human form and we become one with God in a very unique and uncompromising way. In this moment we also capture the love of God and bring it unto and into ourselves. In essence, it's something we do (or should be doing all year), so one might say that this is the big set-up: Love begs to enter, so let every heart prepare its room!

As I continued to write this sermon, I found that I had spent hours (literally), truly wrestling with a text, and yet had very little to say. Not even a good joke was floating around in my head or on the Internet, for that matter. I'm told that my predecessor often ended his sermons with a reminder that "God

loves you, and that is where I am at ¼ in. Perhaps because I have written about love so often also this year, what with Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Holy Week and Easter, and now Christmas. If you have not heard it and believed it by now, no amount of whoopie and hoopla is going to make a difference (to quote the barker in *Lady Sings the Blues...*).

Perhaps this is because we are sharing both a simple and difficult message at the same time. God is love and shares it so completely with us that through the graces of the Spirit we become one. This is the simple side to the equation. The more difficult side, the redemptive side (if we have one) is that "*God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten*

Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (Jn.3:16) This is the more difficult portion which takes a lifetime of study to understand.

There are several types of love in the Bible, but they all emanate from and relate to Divine love. It's easy to comprehend these two words - - divine and love - - and imagine that they might link up in the philosophical plane. Divine love is one wherein all the following positive traits are present. It is true love without any expectations. It never imposes its views and it accepts a person for who they are. With divine love, one finds a willingness to adjust, accommodate, share, sacrifice, and to be

compassionate.ⁱ When we express ourselves in any of these ways, we too are part of the Divine package that is love to others.

Is this love recognizable? For you biblical scholars I found this take on the most famous portion on love found in the bible. Based on *1 Corinthians 13*, it proclaims in a nearly plagiaristic format “If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime,

but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend myriad holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust.

But giving the gift of love will endure.”ⁱⁱ

Amusing and insightful. It put me in search of other inspirational quotes about love at Christmas (you'd think that there'd be thousands on the Internet, but there aren't). Here is a good small grouping from a wide variety of sources:

George Matthew Adams, "The Christmas Heart"

Let us remember that the Christmas heart is a giving heart, a wide open heart that thinks of others first. The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history, because it has meant the pouring into a sick world the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for almost two thousand years..Underneath all the bulging bundles is this beating Christmas heart.

Taylor Caldwell

I am not alone at all, I thought. I was never alone at all. And that, of course, is the message of Christmas. We are never alone. Not when the night is darkest, the wind coldest, the world seemingly most

indifferent. For this is still the time God chooses.

Helen Keller

The only real blind person at Christmas-time is he who has not Christmas in his heart.

Dale Evans Rogers

Christmas, my child, is love in action.
Every time we love, every time we give,
it's Christmas.

Bess Steeter Aldrich

Christmas Eve was a night of song that wrapped itself about you like a shawl. But it warmed more than your body. It warmed your heart... filled it, too, with melody that would last forever.

Alexander Smith

Christmas is the day that holds all time together.

Mother Teresa

It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you... yes, it is Christmas every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand.

Ruth Carter Stapleton

Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most.

W. C. Jones

The joy of brightening other lives,
bearing each others' burdens, easing
other's loads and supplanting empty

hearts and lives with generous gifts becomes for us the magic of Christmas.

Bob Hope

My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?ⁱⁱⁱ

Right on, Bob. It's interesting to see how people understand what Scripture offers. We spent some time in our Advent study group this week dealing with the challenge to love our enemies. Can we do so? What is there about the nature of love and what God has taught us that allows for a deeper understanding of who we are and who

we should be and how we should act?
We learn, it seems, through trying.

The author Joshua Becker in *Giving the Gift of Christmas* says this: “Love. Christmas is a season of love—a celebration of sacrificing what we have to show appreciation to those who mean the most. And while expressing love to another may be the most beautiful thing we can ever do, it can also be one of the most difficult—especially when those who should love us the most withhold it. Love anyway. True love is not self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. And demands nothing in return.”^{iv} So perhaps the best gift at Christmas is love-related: love of

neighbor. Love of self. Try those on for size when you can't think of any other gift to give at Christmas.

God is love; God came down at Christmas. God gave the Divine Self so that we might from then on remember the purpose of creation. But according to our Scripture for this morning, God gave us this gift of self in the form of a Living Word. In *The Letter to the Romans*, Paul writes that "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."^v Therefore what we know and feel and understand and intuit about God is given to us through the Spoken Word. That is why we read bible

lessons on Sundays and on other church festive occasions. They are how we learn about God - - about the love of God - - about the Spirit moving in and around us. So if someone asks if you have been saved you can tell them, "Yes, because I have listened to the word of the Loving God, and this love and giving of self has made me whole." (If you can remember that while up against the wall, bless you. Try "God has gifted me with all the tools I need to continue in my journey into the kingdom." Or just say "yes" and walk away...)

I hope you feel loved this Christmas, and that you find a way to make that love a permanent feeling. Rossetti opens her

poem with what could be our mantra to help inform us and remind us, that

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

May you see the signs, and understand their meaning, and may they bring you a blessed and all the while most joyful Christmas.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <https://www.bing.com/search?q=meaning+of+divine+love&form=EDGEAR&qs=PF&cvid=42d32519b6b64f50aba1c2875fc20dac&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

ⁱⁱ <http://christmas.spike-jamie.com/inspirational.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thoughtco.com/inspirational-christmas-quotes-2831925>

^{iv} <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/giving-the-gift-of-christmas/>

^v Romans 10:17