

Christmas 2011

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock evening service, December 24, 2011,
The Eve of The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on Luke 2:1-14.*

Christmas is a story, and we begin and end with that story. Tonight I have three stories—the mother and the baby, a tycoon and a town. Each story is about love in its own way.

Love came down at Christmas,

the poet Christina Rossetti wrote.

*Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.*

If there is a loving Creator behind the universe—and I have my good days and bad days wrestling with that question—then incarnation, meaning *embodiment*, the very thing we celebrate in the birth of Jesus, means that *love took shape in us*. Or, as the first century poet and theologian known as John put it, “the word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is not history in the strictest sense, but we couldn't live without it. It's a story meant to safeguard a historical fact: Jesus was born—born into a violent, needy and expectant world, and some things have never been the same.

If I were fleshing out that story the way Luke's gospel does, I'd add a psychologist to the guests at the inn, the townspeople, the shepherds and the animals in the stable.

That's absurd only if you don't believe that the incarnation goes on. It's possible to put flesh on love, and we are thoroughly human and therefore unceasingly curious about *how* to love

We want love. We need it, but we often mess it up in self-defeating ways.

Why?

Psychology broadly teaches that we deal with anxiety of being human by shoving troublesome thoughts and feelings into our unconscious. Freud seemingly defined the field by holding that our major repressions are sexual or aggressive impulses. Taboos against these impulses are nearly universal.

But a lesser-known psychologist, the Scottish clinician and writer, Ian Suttie, argued that what we actually repress is affection and openness. He argued that the collective taboo in our culture that still messes up humanity is not the taboo against sex but the taboo against tenderness.

By studying the human infant, Suttie saw us born with two independent inclinations. The primary one is a desire for the social give-and-take and the responsive relationship we call love. Where Freud saw narcissism and aggression, Suttie saw a playful, harmonious game between the infant and the nursing mother. (Here I'd ask you to hold the image of Mary and the infant Jesus in your mind's eye.) The infant begins to smile when satisfied and then smile at the mother's satisfaction at his being satisfied. It's a playful, tender, loving exchange.

When we grow into mature selves, our greatest fear is the loss of that loving exchange, the fear of abandonment. It's a fear on both sides, of course—the infant's growing independence and the mother's less urgent response to the infant's insistent cry.

Then we descend into a life-long dance that can end with our tendency to reject love before we're rejected as we search for it.

To deal with the pain of being human, we can base our life on self-sufficiency or power. Ian Suttie believed he saw that either/or choice as the particular tendency of our individualistic culture. As such, the search too often ends painfully. We become people who can't love because we're afraid that the world will not give us love.

That's why Christmas—incarnation— is so important.

An executive business consultant discovered this one day when working with a group of corporate executives. In a discussion group he said, “Sometimes it is necessary to speak from the heart.”

“The heart is a pump,” the CEO and oil tycoon grumped in reply.

Later, when the consultant had softened some of his defenses, the CEO took him to his office and unlocked a drawer of his impressive desk. There was a stash of heartfelt and tender poetry he had written. He had never shown it to anyone, fearing that in doing so he would lose his authority.

We have yielded to the tendency to lock that drawer, never to open up the love that it is possible for us to give.

Think how things might be different—for that CEO, for our work lives, really for the world we live in.

Will you be able to show your love? Will there be moments when you'll be able to get over your need for self-sufficiency enough to stop demanding it for everyone else?

Can you embody the love that was given to you—first to those closest to you and then to anyone who may be in need?

Someone has embodied that love for you. That's the whole Jesus story. His birth opened that drawer and let its tender secrets out.

You might call that the Christmas test. Giving and receiving love in a personal way for starters—everything starts with you.

Then staying alert to how love can be shown in the world— from your nearest neighbor, to those who may suffer in lonely silence, to a member of your family from whom you're estranged, to a brave soldier sent to do our work, to the peacemakers, whose job on this planet in pain is as complicated as it has ever been.

Several Christmases ago, a visitor to St. Bart's told me a story so simple and inspiring that I think of it every year, and I now commend it to you as an example of showing love to your neighbor.

This young man had grown up in Billings, Montana. He was somewhat surprised at how fervently religious New Yorkers are at Christmas. He recalled that his high school had a full Christmas pageant, and that Billings' Christmas concert was unabashedly Christian. He took it for granted that Christianity ruled, until one year when there were some frightening episodes of anti-Semitism against the few Jewish citizens in Billings and their synagogue. It all happened in the run-up to Christmas. With the pageant story on their minds, and carols from the concert ringing in their ears, the churches in Billings got together and asked their members to display menorahs in the windows of their homes.

The violence stopped.

Love came down at Christmas that year in that little town. Someone opened the drawer of that town and the collective, poetic love was put into action.

Someone has embodied love for you, by his very birth, in the tender love play between mother and child.

Embody it for yourself, in your family; and when the pain of the world calls, for others and let the love that came down at Christmas come any day of the year.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.*