

Christmas Eve 2014 The Greatest Gift

Luke 2:6-7 "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger."

The top "what is" Google search for 2014 part way through the year was: "What is love?" [cited "In Google We Trust," Posted August 4, 2014 - <http://www.churchandculture.org/Blog.asp?ID=6270>]

Love is always going to be a topic people are thinking about. I think especially so at this time of year.

How does one measure love?

I was told about an episode of the TV show "The Office." The office staff held a gift exchange at their Christmas party. They stipulated a \$20 limit. Michael, the boss, far exceeded that, buying a \$400 iPad for his gift recipient. At the party, Michael then said: "Presents are the best way to show someone how much you care. It's like this tangible thing that you can point to and say, 'Hey, man, I love you this many dollars worth.'" Are you wondering what he received as a gift? The scene unfolded like this:

Michael: Oh hey, for me. What is in here? [opens a handmade oven mitt] Oh, come on.

Phyllis: I knitted it for you.

Michael: An oven mitt? Okay. [walks out] So Phyllis is basically saying, "Hey Michael, I know you did a lot to help the office this year but I only care about you a homemade oven mitt's worth."

"Puny gift." That was Michael's assessment. What do you think? You might see a flaw. ("Love" is still not spelled with a \$ - dollar sign.) The show undoubtedly meant to be obvious about that. But there is almost always an element of truth in humor too. What was it in this case? People hold mixed-up ideas about how to measure love.

What is love? How does one measure it?

There is one gift that can help us answer those questions. The gift comes wrapped in cloths - this baby, whom we see, laid in a manger: God himself.

In appearance, by all external measures, he is small - weak. This may raise a challenge. "This is your God?", someone may voice. Their assessment is: "puny God."

There's a famous movie scene that closes with those two words. It is in the Avengers. Loki is a character who wants to rule the earth. He boasts "I am a god, and I will not be bullied..." But before he can finish speaking, the Hulk thrashes him around like a ragdoll, leaving him embedded in the ground. The Hulk's only real dialogue of the movie follows. He walks away, uttering: "Puny god."



It's not too often you'll hear me cite a comic character for their theological findings. But that's spot on. No flaws in the conclusion there. You have a man, trying to claim to be more than what he is, and being shown for what he really is.

The thing that is really interesting to think about is: How often – sadly – is this seen in the real world? You see a man trying to elevate himself to a status he neither has, nor deserves. There is a long list of men who have claimed to be god – or to have become god –, or cases where other humans have made the claim about them. You need no fictional hulk to put them in their place. Death itself has smashed them down to dust. Your assessment should be "puny god" ... as you walk away.

It's a different narrative altogether when we come to baby Jesus in a manger. Here you see God lowering himself to our human state. He comes to claim a life of pain, trouble, sweat that he did not deserve. Why? Because he knew love - deep love for us.

For us, God became human! Though he is infinite, God the Son occupied the space of a little human being. Is that weakness, or is that the greatest display of strength human eyes have ever witnessed?

To arrive at the answer, you must look ahead from Christmas night to when Jesus showed he would not be bullied by death. Oh, he died. But then... on the third day He rose! His identity as God - God the Son - is ultimately validated by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

But look at more than just that from His time on this earth! If you want to measure his strength – the full scope of it, come with me full-circle back to the topic with which we started: what is love?

I want to go back to the oven mitt. "Really, the oven mitt?" Yeah, just for a moment. Just to see this point. Phyllis put more than money into her gift. What else went in? Her time. Her

labor. I think I can hear in her words a tone – an attitude – too: care. What do you think: who put more love into their gift – Michael, or Phyllis? I'm not looking for an answer for that. I'm looking to lead you on to our conclusion tonight...

Our God put himself into his Christmas gift to us. His time. God the Son, Jesus, spent every moment of every day of his humble life living for you. His labor. Jesus fought for you. He knew when he came that he'd be tempted in every way you and I are. He had to face the temptations, like to get angry or to get even or to think only of himself. He fought them all off. Why? Because he knew that without his perfect lifetime, we would remain separated from him for all eternity. And that all leads up to... His sacrifice. The pain he went through – his suffering – the hell – well, He allowed it to be done to him - for you. He went through it all in the place of you – and me.

What is love? This is the answer.

“This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins” – 1 John 4. This is news for all people: Luke 2:10 “...a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

All the questions we've looked at tonight find their answer in one person: what is love? How do you measure it? What is strength? What is the greatest measure of it?

Here, in the manger of Christmas, is no small thing. It is no feeble present. It is the Greatest Gift ever: a Savior, our Lord.

What does that mean for you going forward from Christmas?

I told you at the opening about the top “what is” Google search up through part way of this year. I just yesterday found on Google the current chart. There are a few other things on the minds of people. The top three “what is” searches in the United States for the year are:

- 1- What is ALS? ("Lou Gehrig's Disease")
- 2- What is Ebola?
- 3- What is ISIS?

Also making the top 10: “What is MERS?”(Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), and “What is Hamas?” [<https://www.google.com/trends/topcharts#vm=cat&geo=US&date=2014&cid>]

That's a lot of disease and terror in the top ten. It shouldn't surprise us that such things are on people's minds. It's what we encounter. This world in so many ways shows: it is broken. This world isn't the way it's supposed to be.

But it's not just the world that's not right... it's you and me. Our names don't make the news, like ISIS and Ebola. But what's wrong right here (pointing self ward) is enough to make us feel sick inside... with the guilt for all the selfish, mean, thoughtless, cold things we've done. Those are more than mistakes. Sin marks every calendar page of our lives. It leaves people in our world hurting. We hurt too in the wake of our sin, feeling sometimes empty – sometimes sad – sometimes wondering where we stand. It shouldn't surprise us to see a world searching for the answer to “what is love.”

That's what makes this night so important. We have been given the answer. Our problem of sin and guilt required this gift from God: himself, Christ, the Lord.

When he came, he enacted the most unfair gift exchange ever! He gave the world what? And he took what – chose what – in return? He came to take from us our sin. All the sins that you have struggled with, all their guilt, all their shame – God the Father took all of it, and put it on His Son. Jesus took it all from us. And God declares to us: Your sin is forgiven.

See God the Father give His One and Only Son for you. God gave the gift big enough to save the world. And he tells you what that means for you: “Whoever believes in Him will not perish; whoever believes in Him has eternal life.”

Know Him. Hear His Word to you, and trust Him as your Savior and Lord. He brings peace for His people for every day of life, which will last into eternal days. Amen.