

## “Transforming Love”

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Christmas has come and gone. The Christmas decorations are boxed and in the basement, the gifts are put away. New challenges have already presented themselves to us in our homes, our workplaces, our church family; we are again caught up in the business and busyness of a new year. Wait a minute! At Christmas we proclaimed the birth of Jesus our Savior. Have we boxed him up too? In the midst of all of the challenges presented in this New Year have we relegated Jesus and the good news of Christmas to the basement of our consciousness?

If only we could bend time, and for a few moments, stand in the quiet of that stable in Bethlehem once again. In this humble place, our way of looking at life is turned upside down. The creator God, ultimate power in the universe, comes wrapped in the tiny form of a baby. The lesson of the stable, the manger, the baby is this: love, not prestige, not wealth, not the accumulation of things, but love; love empowers life. It is love that gives life meaning and purpose. Jesus, our savior and lord embodies that love and gives love concrete expression. As Pierre Vinet says, “The Christian faith does not consist in the belief that we are saved, but in the belief that we are loved.” (REPEAT)

In his ministry Jesus articulates God’s love in word and action. While his loving hands heal the leper, the lame and the blind, Jesus speaks of a God who, in the words of the Interpreter’s Bible, “clothes the grass and feeds the ravens. A God who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust; the cheapest sparrow does not die without God’s remembrance and the hairs of our heads are all numbered.”

At the stable, God’s love becomes concrete, embodied in Jesus who becomes the hands and feet of God, ministering in a hurting world. But the stable stands in the shadow of the cross. On the cross God’s love becomes dynamic: the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit. What will the response to this love be? When Jesus proclaims this cleansing, universal inclusive love of God

in his former hometown of Nazareth by recounting the stories of Elijah's ministry to the widow of Sidon and Elisha's ministry to Naaman the Syrian leper, the enraged populace drive him out of town and prepare to throw him over a cliff. The message of love embodied in Jesus the Messiah is not welcomed but reviled. The men and women of Nazareth choose fragmented self love; limited, exclusive, maintaining the status quo; the message of God's love distorted and broken.

What will our response be? I would like to share a story about my father. A retired milkman and truck driver, my father had difficulty accepting persons of different cultures and religions. We had many discussions on the subject. An avid member of the shrine club, one of his great joys was working as an usher, helping disabled children into their seats during the annual Shrine Circus. One day, as he was assisting in his assigned area, he came upon one of the coliseum cleaning ladies in discussion with the floor manager. The floor manager was demanding she go home insisting that he did not have enough work for her to stay the day. The woman was begging in broken English to be allowed to stay, offering to do any work available. Pointing to her young son standing by the wall, she said over and over that she had promised she would take him to the circus today but that she could not afford to do so if she could not work. The floor manager shrugged, argued, shoved the woman angrily and finally walked away. The woman went to her son, knelt beside him putting her arms around him and began to cry. My father had been rooted to the spot, unnoticed. "I was going to walk away, after all, it was no business of mine," Dad told me later, "but I couldn't" Going to the woman Dad offered to help. Soon, having bought the best tickets he could afford, plus popcorn, a balloon and a ticket to ride the elephant, Dad settled the woman and her son in their seats. "I will never forget the look on her face," he told me "or the smile on the face of her little son." When my father told me this story, he wept

There is a saying, “think outside the box”. Through our encounter with Jesus, symbolized in stable and cross God is saying to us “love outside the box”. As opposed to self love, selfish love; exclusive, limited, status quo love is God’s love; universal, inclusive, transforming. What a difference we might make in our homes, our places of work and play, our church family even our world by actively living and loving “outside the box”.

Carved into the wall of Mother Theresa’s home for children in Calcutta are these words:

*People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.  
Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.  
Be kind anyway.*

*If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies.  
Succeed anyway.*

*If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you.  
Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight.  
Build anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous.  
Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, people will forget tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough.  
Give the world the best you have anyway.*

In his hymn to love (I Corinthians ch. 13), Paul the apostle masterfully summarizes “love outside of the box”: (READ)

AMEN