

“Will We Always Remember This Christmas?” December 24, 2020
Luke 2:1-20 WPC, Greenville
Christmas Eve (recorded) Ben Dorr

Perhaps more than any other time of year, Christmas puts an emphasis on doing things FOR other people.

Isn't that right?
For example...

- How many of you have gone shopping, either in a store or online, FOR someone else this month?
- How many of you have given gifts to church or to charity this month, because you want to do something FOR those who don't have as much as you?
- How many of you will be preparing a meal tomorrow FOR your family to enjoy?

More than any other time of year, Christmas teaches us that our job is to do things FOR other people...

Now I hope you don't hear me say tonight that there's something wrong with doing things for other people. That's not my point at all. Particularly in a year that's been as challenging as this one...doing for is an act of Christian faith, an act of generosity and love.

What I do want to do this evening is ask you to consider another word besides **for** that gets at the heart of this night.

The word is WITH.
Being with other people.

It can be easy to take that little word for granted, the word “with”...but it’s an important word.

My uncle died three years ago.

Before he died, I always looked forward to the Christmas letter that Uncle Don would write to his extended family every year.

In one of those letters, he shared a memory.

When he was a young man working in the chemical industry, he managed a small field office inside a large chemical plant. Because it was a small office, almost no one ever came by—it was just the secretary and my uncle working there each day.

One December, shortly before Christmas, his secretary asked if they could buy some Christmas decorations for the office.

“I told her no,” my uncle wrote, “as my thinking was that we never had any visitors to our office so....”

—what would we do that for?

The secretary proceeded to call my aunt to see if my uncle had a problem with celebrating Christmas. No, of course not. My uncle could just be a “Bah humbug” kind of person sometimes.

So when my uncle showed up at the office the following Monday, a miniature elf was standing on his desk.

The elf was holding a flag.

The flag read, “Bah humbug”.

“Needless to say,” my uncle wrote, “I consented to buying some decorations for the office.”

What would we do that for?

That was my uncle's first question, but it was the wrong question.

The first question at Christmas is not, "What is this for?"

It's WITH...

How can I be WITH this person, these people at this time in their lives?

According to the Gospel writers, that's what Christmas is all about. Luke's Christmas story is the traditional story, which we heard a moment ago.

But I'm sure you'll also recall how Matthew puts it:

"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet:
 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
 and they shall name him Emmanuel,'
 which means, 'God is with us.'"

Do you know about the power of being with?

There's a scene in Ken Burns' documentary that came out last year, "Country Music".

Hank Williams, Jr. is being interviewed, and he's talking about a time early in his career, when he was trying to get out from under the shadow of his father, the great country music legend, Hank Williams.

And Hank Williams, Jr. was contemplating his future while on vacation in Montana, and he was hiking a ridge, and he fell.

500 feet—he fell.

It broke nearly every bone in his face.

But miraculously, he survived.

And when word reached his godparents that their godson had been in a bad fall and was in the hospital, Johnny Cash and June Carter got to that hospital as quickly as they could.

And they sat in that hospital room.

And Johnny Cash stayed in that hospital room.

And you know what Hank Williams, Jr. says about Johnny Cash stopping whatever he was doing and coming to visit him at that moment?

“There wasn’t any better medicine than having him there with me...”

It’s the power of “being with”...

The word “with” is why I think we’ll always remember this Christmas. I suspect we know the power of “with” this year more so than any OTHER year.

A year in which, instead of 900 people packing this sanctuary for a Christmas Eve service, many of you are at home for this Christmas Eve service.

A year in which we were without certain traditions or celebrations or without seeing people we love face to face...all of which makes me realize how much I’ve taken for granted about “with” in the years leading up to this one.

Has anyone else felt that way?

Like you were taking certain things for granted, and this year came along, and you realized you couldn't take those things for granted?

It's not always a bad thing to realize you were taking something for granted.

Ted Wardlaw is the President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He's been there for almost 20 years, but before he was a seminary president, he pastored a few churches.

Ted recalls how on one particular Christmas Eve, the church he was serving had three services. Two of the services were in the sanctuary and one of them, the 9:00 evening service, was in the church's chapel.

Now, in order to get into the chapel that night, the people who came to worship had to walk through a crowd of about 50 or so men who were standing outside the church's homeless shelter.

Those fifty men had hoped to be in the church's shelter, but it filled up so fast, there wasn't enough room.

So...they were huddled together at the intersection right outside the church's chapel. They were there waiting for a bus that would take them to a city shelter. They were invited inside to join in the worship service that night, but they understandably declined so that they could wait for their bus.

The congregation made its way into the chapel, and started their worship.

In good Presbyterian style, there was a unison prayer of confession. Then the Associate Pastor announced the news of pardon and acceptance.

"Friends," this pastor said,
 "Believe the Good News of the Gospel!
 In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!"

And at the very moment that sentence was finished, an amazing thing happened. A huge cheer went up on the other side of the stone wall of the chapel!

The cheer came from the men huddled outside.
 "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!"
 "Hooray!!"

But they weren't cheering the words of the worship service.
 What they were cheering was the arrival of the bus!

The congregation quickly figured out that this was why they cheered...but the effect on the congregation's side of the stone wall was riveting!

It was as if they suddenly heard the proper response to words that they had always taken for granted.¹

Has this year changed anything that you used to take for granted?
 I know what I used to take for granted.
 Being with...

Being with all of you here in the sanctuary and singing.
 I hope I will never take it for granted again.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw in his sermon "The Stewardship of Praise," August 31, 1997, at www.day1.org.

Making a trip to see loved ones who live out of state.
I hope I will never take it for granted again.

Of course, the good news this evening is that God has never taken any of us for granted. The news at Christmas is that God is with us, even in our darkest hours, in all seasons of our lives, and that nothing in all creation can get in the way of God's presence and grace and love FOR us...

And nothing can diminish God's desire to be WITH us.

There's a novel that Anne Tyler wrote years ago, called *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*.

In the novel, a character named Ezra Tull decides to reopen Mrs. Scarlatti's restaurant in Baltimore and cook what people were homesick for...

"It's not only pot roast," Ezra explains to someone who's eating there for the first time. "...it's more like...what you long for when you're sad and everyone's been wearing you down.

"See, there's this cook, this real country cook, and pot roast is the least of what she does. There's also pan-fried potatoes, black-eyed peas, beaten biscuits..."²

In other words, it's not just the food that he wanted his restaurant to offer. Ezra Tull wants people in his restaurant to remember home, TO FEEL AT HOME, to experience the joy of being together,
of being WITH...
with people who love you,

² Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.

with people who know you,
with people who accept you...

To let the food awaken those memories.

I wonder if that's what Jesus is up to...in church.
Trying to help us remember that we are known and loved,
and forgiven and cherished...

Let me invite you to engage in an imaginary exercise with me.

Imagine that our church...is Jesus' very own HOMESICK
RESTAURANT.

And imagine that Jesus is working this Christmas Eve,
not here in the sanctuary but in each of your homes,
he's wearing an apron, and he's waiting on you.

“What would you like?”

And you look at the menu.
And it's not food that's on the menu.

It's everything that Jesus knows how to make.
It's hope, it's peace. It's joy. It's love.

On his menu is a fresh start.
The assurance that you will be ok,
and your loved ones will be ok.

Perhaps you're not even sure what it is you want the most from
Jesus right now...but that's ok.

Jesus says, “I think I know.”

And after Jesus heads to the kitchen, you realize that you forgot to ask him what it was going to cost. I mean, you know you're in trouble when the prices on the menu are not even listed.

And Jesus returns, and you point out to him there are no prices on the menu.

And Jesus says:

**“I know. I’ve already paid for you.
It’s on the house.**

And then Jesus sits down next to you.
And he says:

**Tell me about it.
Tell me what’s going on in your life right now.**

Did I say that was an imaginary exercise?
It’s not imaginary.

The risen Jesus is at your home tonight.
If you’ve got some time, he’d like to talk with you.

That’s why he was born into this world.
Born for you? Oh yes.
But also born...to be...with you—
at all times,
in all places,
in every season of our lives.

Amen.