

I GIVE MY HEART
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 (NRSV)
February 7, 2010

Thomas D. York
Knox Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

Not too long ago we celebrated Jesus' birth and many of you may have sung "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It is one of my favorite carol, actually, the one that transports me, in memory, back to childhood and family Christmas celebrations, and in imagination to a gentle, quiet village, the City of David, the House of Bread, where Mary and Joseph found no room in the inn and welcomed their new son in the stable and laid their son in a manger

Now many of you may have visited Bethlehem at one time and if so, you know that it is a far cry from that carol. In fact, the New York Times Magazine had an article, "*Allah in Bethlehem.*" "The Bethlehem tourists find nothing looks like the town the Son of God might want to be born in ... Everything here is meant to test your faith ... This, the most un-Christmas like spot in Christendom. "

Modern day Bethlehem is a suburb of Jerusalem. It is in what has been called the West Bank: that is, until 1967 it was part of Jordan. The people who live there are Palestinian; some Christian, mostly Muslim. To drive from Jerusalem to Bethlehem or to any part of the West Bank you have to pass through a military check point.

Bethlehem is rough around the edges. It is not a little town and it surely does not lie still, at least while we were there. Nativity tourism is the town's chief source of revenue. Manger Square is a big plaza, filled with tourist buses, automobiles and vendors: men and boys of all ages, very aggressively selling post cards, trinkets, Arab headdresses, Palestinian flags, beads, rosaries, mother of pearl replicas of the manger. There are two churches at Manger Square, a legacy of the Crusades actually. Many people have never quite forgotten that it was Rome that sponsored the Crusades and so when and where possible they have been more cooperative with Christian churches that didn't participate so enthusiastically in the invasion of their country and the slaughter of their people in the name of Jesus. So there are Orthodox churches: Greek and Russian and Armenian and Serbian. At Manger Square it is an Orthodox church standing over the grotto, and beside it a Roman Catholic Church.

Grotto? Hallmark has assured me it was a stable... How can we have cattle lowing if we don't have a stable? "Grotto" sounds like a Tunisian restaurant. All Luke says, of course, is that they laid him in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn; and Matthew merely says the Magi came to the house where they were.

The Church of the Nativity is very crowded, and ornate. Some might call it garish, with Christmas ornaments hanging from the ceiling and icons and candles and strings of Christmas lights covering every available space and filling every available corner. Often a long line twists around the nave leading to a narrow, one-person-at-a-time stairway down to a tiny space which indeed appears to be a kind of cave in the rock. There is a tiny room, maybe six feet by six feet with bare rock on one side and a many pointed, gilt, star inlaid in the floor where tradition says the birth took place. An officious gentleman in his shirt sleeves may be standing in the middle of the room gesturing aggressively and barking: "There's the manger - there's the birth - there's the

exit. Take a look, take a picture and go."

Visiting Bethlehem is a healthy reminder that Jesus was born into the real world, not the world created by the Christmas industry. And that maybe the heat and dust and crowds, the poverty and political tension, the soldiers, the ever present anxiety about the possibility of violence, even the religious competition, the pilgrims pushing ... Maybe all of that is not at all unlike the Bethlehem in which Jesus was actually born.

Harvard Theologian Diana Eck in her book, *Encountering God*, argues that love is the essence of the Christian life. Love is what people do when they know about God's gift of Jesus Christ. Christian faith, she says, has more to do with love than theology.

"The language of faith is the language of affection, ... Faith language is analogous to the language we use when we say to someone, 'I love you, you're the only one in the world for me.' It does not mean 'I have systematically surveyed everyone in the world and I have chosen you.'"

The great Christian affirmations of faith - the Creeds - begin, in the original Latin, with the word "Credo," which we translate, "I believe." What credo really means in Latin is "I give my heart to," not - I have thought about this and conclude that these theological propositions are intellectually true.

Faith, Eck argues, is not about propositions, but about love and commitment. [p. 951

Religion, she says, takes the love of the Gospel and turns it upside down. "How is it that the vibrancy of love language and heart language become starched and stiffened over time into the language of dogma?" (Which sounds a lot like what is happening in our Presbyterian family these days.)

The uniqueness of Christianity is that it takes an idea, more or less shared by all religions - the holiness of God and redefines it as the holy love of God. What makes us Christian, what is uniquely Christian, is the idea that in Jesus Christ, God is revealed as love and the life of faith is not a struggle to achieve purity or holiness but is a commitment to live out that same love in daily life. Eck is right. Too often the churches have taught that Christian life is essentially either a matter of believing the right doctrines or achieving a degree of moral purity. But that misses the entire point.

Love exists in and for the real world and real people or it doesn't exist

There is amazing agreement between religion and the social sciences that love, or something very much like it, lies at the heart of both the human dilemma and human promise.

Put as simply as possible, we need love in order to live. We all know now that babies don't do very well physically if they are not touched and stroked and patted and sung to and talked to. It was Erik Erikson who said that a "foundational element of infant development is experiencing the gaze of a delighted other."

Think about how utterly true that is. Think about neglected and abandoned children and their prospects. Think about the curse of child abuse and its almost demonic propensity for repeating itself in the next generation, so that abused children become abusing parents. Think about what it means in the under-culture of poverty, where infants, toddlers, children who do not experience the gaze of a delighted other ever, become angry adolescents with easy access to drugs and guns.

Psychiatrist Gerald May was asked to speak to a conference on psychiatry and the Christian faith recently on the topic of love. He entitled his talk, "Ten Things I Think I Know About Love" because if he had to talk about what he knew for sure about love all he could do is smile and sit down. Among the things Dr. May thinks he knows about love is that love is a mystery, it causes us to be vulnerable, it means paying attention to someone. He also proposes that no one is incapable of love and no one loves himself or herself sufficiently.

Jonathan Kozol's wonderful children in *Amazing Grace* - survive because someone pays attention and loves them: a mother, a grandmother, a school teacher, a minister, anybody will do.

Cornell West says what the African American community needs most, particularly African American men, is self love.

There is a powerful passage by James Baldwin:

"The joint, as Fats Waller would have said, was jumping. And during the last set the saxophone player took over with a terrific solo. He was a kid. But somewhere along the line he discovered he could say it with a saxophone. He stood there, wide-legged, humping the air, filling his narrow chest, shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn: 'Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you? Do you?' The same phrase unbearably and endlessly repeated with all the force the kid had ... The question was terrible and real. The boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past,... in gutters and gang fights ... behind marijuana or the needles. Somewhere in the past he had received a blow from which he would never recover. 'Do you love me?' The men on the stand stayed with him cool and at a distance, adding and questioning. But, each man knew that the boy was blowing for each one of them." [See Donald McCullough, p. 1431

Don McCullough, President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, says "the church exists to answer that young man's question." That is why we are here - and every church in Christendom, for that matter - to point to the love of God in Jesus Christ and say "yes, you are loved, loved more than you can imagine, loved by a God who will never let you go." [Donald McCullough *The Trivialization of God*, p. 1431

That's the real importance of this Church's mission: somehow in the process of being tutored and befriended by a volunteer, a youngster from Over-the-Rhine experiences the gaze of a delighted other and knows he or she is loved. Somehow, sometimes, homeless family knows for a moment at least that he is a beloved child of God. But what has the possibility of being life changing and life creating is the way service, mission, conveys the essential power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's love, and the transforming potential to turn ordinary human beings into lovers.

The church, Donald McCullough says, is a "community of prodigal lovers." And I propose that if we need the experience of being loved to survive, we need to learn how to love in order truly to live.

Langdon Gilkey, who taught theology at the University of Chicago wrote:

"To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of self, of the depths of its joys, than being loved. Thus it is the parent who is really blessed by the presence of the child, not the reverse, because of the incredible gift of another being whom we can hardly help but love." [*Message and Existence*]

A long time ago I clipped an entry from a devotional guide which I have quoted before. It is by a writer I do not know but with whom I agree. His name is Jack Kornfield,

"The things that matter most in our lives are not fantastic or grand. They are the moments when we touch one another, when we are there in the most attentive and caring ways. This simple and profound intimacy is the love that we all long for."

And then Mr. Kornfield writes about something utterly true and ultimately important.

"When people come to the end of their life and look back, the questions they most often ask are not usually, 'How much is in my bank account?' or 'How many books did I write?' 'What did I build?'"

What we all ask is very simple. "Did I learn to love? Did I love enough? Did I live fully?"
[See Jack Kornfield, *Daybook*, "A Path With Heart," June 5, 1995]

So faith, hope, love abide - these three - but the greatest of these is love. Amen.