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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2014

Text: I John 4:7–16

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The history, culture, and expectations surrounding Christmas are enormous. I've often wondered if the Christmas season has inspired more art, music, literature than any other single event. My guess is that only Good Friday and Easter have provided more inspiration. For some 16 centuries, Christians have set aside Christ's birth as a most significant event, worthy of special consideration and pious devotion.

But I fear the consideration and devotion have largely become misplaced, at least, in 21st century America. The celebrations surrounding Christ's birthday have become so large that we've forgotten whose birthday we're remembering. A survey of some years back asked self-identified Christians what was the most important part of Christmas. Some 37% said Jesus was what made Christmas unique and special; some 44% said "family time" was what made Christmas special.

Don't worry, I won't enter into a long-winded tirade into how Christmas is abused, misunderstood, and neglected. I love the family time associated with Christmas, along with the gifts, the music, the food, the extra worship services, and everything else. But maybe you're here tonight longing to experience something deeper and more significant. If so, then we're kindred spirits. And I pray that the Holy Spirit would graciously deepen our faith in Jesus, enrich our hearts and minds with Christ's joy, give us divine peace that surpasses human imagination, and fill our lives with His love.

If you had to give a one-word summary of Christmas, what would it be?

Grace. That's a beautiful word with even more beautiful content. Grace simply means divine blessings and favor that are unearned, unmerited. You don't do anything to get God's grace. Otherwise, it isn't grace. The giving of Christmas gifts to friends, family and loved ones is a small reminder of God's grace. These gifts, after all, are expressions of grace and love, not payments or bribes to induce better behavior.

The Virgin Mary stands as one of the single greatest examples of God's grace bestowed freely and without any merit or worthiness in the person. The angel Gabriel greeted her with "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you! ... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." Christmas certainly reminds us that God the Father give us divine grace through His Son, Jesus. Mary is graced with God's presence in Jesus. And to be sure, the Bible teaches us, almost on every page, that we are God's holy people, graced by His presence in the Lord Jesus.

Joy, could that be your one-word summary? We could sure use more joy in our grief-stricken world. We sing a wonderful hymn, "Joy to the World" that reminds us that Christmas is truly a season of joy. And did not the angel tell the fearful shepherds, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Joy is found in Jesus.

I wonder, however, if we don't confuse joy with happiness or worse, mere pleasure. Happiness and pleasure are good things; they are found in the body and the mind. I'm happy and find a certain level of pleasure, for example, when the Dallas Cowboys go to the playoffs. But that team doesn't have any influence on whether or not I'm a joyful person. Joy, you see, comes from the depths of our soul, our true self. Joy is a gift of God, notice it's a gift; we're back to grace again.

Joy settles in the depths of our heart and mind, even to the inner recesses of our immortal soul. It transcends happiness and pleasure. Joy comes through the fulfillment of our deepest longing to know God and to love Him with our hearts and souls. For God created us, in the beginning, to know Him and find our fulfillment in Him and His divine gifts. One famous and wise Christian once wrote, "...to praise Thee is (man's) joy. For Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." Jesus gives joy unspeakable and full of glory. Christmas reminds us what the shepherds found in the Child born in Bethlehem's humble manger: joy.

Peace, could that be your one-word summary of Christmas? And could there be anything we need more desperately? On that first Christmas, an angel told the shepherds about the birth of the Savior, the Lord Jesus. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And then as if on cue from the Father Himself, an angelic choir suddenly appears proclaiming rapturous praise, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Jesus gives peace. He takes troubled hearts and minds, souls and consciences and quiets them with His divine peace. God created this world, in the beginning, to know peace and harmony. Man was to know God in peace; man was to know his fellow man in peace; man was to know all creation in peace. But that divine gift was shattered in man's rebellion against God and His will.

Sin is the great enemy of peace. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born in Bethlehem to be the enemy of sin and strife and death. In order to give peace back to His beloved world, Jesus, the virgin-born Son of the Father, must conquer sin. And sin is conquered, ironically enough, through death; but not just any death, the death of God's Son by crucifixion. If we stopped there, if Jesus had stopped there, peace would have been lost forever. But this divine death led to resurrection life on Easter morning.

Peace was given back to this world through the victory of Jesus over sin, strife, and death. Peace that surpasses all human understanding is found in the forgiveness of sins given to us graciously, there's grace again, through Jesus. And where there is peace, there is joy. Jesus gives them all: grace, joy and peace.

Any of these three words, grace, joy, and peace, would make wonderful summaries of Christmas. You can't wrong with any of them. But I think there is another word that serves better, and it includes and embraces grace, joy, and peace. That word is love. You see love is what God is. We heard these simple but profound words from I John a few moments ago, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." Love is the greatest one-word summary of Christmas for God is love; to receive His love is to receive more than His gifts, more than grace, joy, and peace; it's receiving God Himself. Jesus is God coming to us in human flesh and blood to give us Himself in His perfect love.

But I fear we have confused love with lust and selfishness. What is love, we might ask? The willing of the good for the beloved. Love is the exact opposite of lust, which is the mere consumption of the desired object. Love, by contrast, desires and wills and works to give what is best for the beloved.

The self-giving love of God is most clearly seen in the coming of Jesus. "In this the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Christmas is an

explosion of divine love. For God's Son wills and desires to be born in the poverty of Bethlehem in order to work for our good; to give what is best for the world. His birth, life, death and resurrection weren't done for His good but for ours. Greater love has no man than this, said Jesus, to give his life for another.

That perfect, self-giving love worked its way to Calvary's cross and Easter's empty tomb. We heard Jesus' love when He said on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

That divine love draws us deeper into Jesus. Having received that love, we are drawn deeper into loving one another. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." Christmas reminds us that love is the greatest gift we can receive, it's the greatest gift we can give. Receiving the love of Jesus we receive God Himself; by loving one another, that is, willing the good for someone else, we are living in and sharing the love of Jesus.

So what is the most profound word for Christmas? I think it must be love; the love of Jesus for you and me; the love of Jesus we share with one another.

Jesus gives you grace, joy, and peace. More than that; He loves you all.

A very Merry Christmas to you all!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.