

Christmas Eve: Luke 2.1-20

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The Rev. Scott Walters

For once, I thought I'd begin a Christmas Eve homily by acknowledging that a few people in this room may be distracted by their excitement at what might be waiting for them under the tree tomorrow morning. It might be a bicycle or a mermaid skirt or maybe a SHASHIBO Shape Shifting Fidget Cube w/ 36 Rare Earth Magnets. I don't know what that is either, but it's the best selling toy on Amazon.com right now. Don't think I didn't do my research for this sermon.

Of course, when gifts do show up in Christmas homilies, it's usually within a scolding reminder that Christmas is not about presents. It's about Jesus. Which is technically true, I'm afraid. But recently I stumbled across something that assuaged some longstanding guilt about how badly I once wanted an object in this world, and I thought I might pass this good news along to all you other shallow, materialistic sinners out there.

I think I was seven, the biblical number of perfection. Which, come to think of it, is 49 years ago. Seven times seven. Clearly the days have been accomplished for this sermon illustration to be delivered. It wasn't Christmastime. It was summertime, and our family had taken a trip to Dogpatch USA. Dogpatch was a Lil Abner themed amusement park in Marble Falls, Arkansas. It was basically our Disneyland, but, instead of Minnie Mouse and Captain Hook, the park was populated by unfortunate, politically incorrect caricatures of hill people. Shockingly it closed in 1993.

I don't remember any of the characters we saw or a single ride we rode. My only memory is of the miniature Corvette that sat near the ticket booth on a pedestal right at eye level for a seven year old boy. It was red and it was perfect. The fiberglass fenders swept up over the wheels like waves on the water and its tiny headlights retracted into its hood, just like they did on the grown up version. And, best of all ... or maybe worst of all ... the car was to be raffled off and would thus become the possession of the luckiest child in all of human history up till then. I filled out a ticket with great care, triple checking for spelling errors and general legibility, and slipped it into the little slot where I assumed millions upon millions of other hopeful kids had done the same.

As you can imagine, I had a hard time falling asleep for several nights, what with the visions dancing in my head of me driving around town in the car, friends gaping in wonder and awe. I tried to calm myself with the reminder that it would probably take a few days for the raffle to end, the winner to be drawn, and for the bearer of good news to reach the winner's house, presumably in some kind of delivery van with the little car

in the back, gassed up and ready to drive. The local press would surely be invited. I should probably prepare a speech just in case.

The problem was not just how badly the odds of winning were against me. I was also a kid whose parents took him to church. A lot. Which meant that, while I wasn't especially precocious about much of anything else, I did have the guilty conscience of a 70 year old Calvinist. I knew a Christian boy wasn't supposed to want something as much as I wanted that car. But I couldn't even want not to want it. I was doomed. Can anybody here possibly relate?

Well, here's the glimmer of hope for my eternal soul that I stumbled upon just the other day. There's an English theologian I admire named Herbert McCabe who was a scholar of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. You've got to bring in the heavies when you're dealing with these gravest of mortal sins, right? McCabe says that for Plato, perfection existed only in eternal ideals somewhere off in the heavens. Particular things were by definition less than perfect reflections of those ideals. But Plato's student Aristotle saw things differently. The word "perfect" literally means "thoroughly made." For Aristotle, and later for Aquinas, a thing was good or even perfect insofar as it achieved the aims or intentions of its maker. Goodness could exist in the thing itself right here in the material world. Not only that — and here's where we can really kick the self justification into high gear — evidence of something's goodness shows up in our desire for it. The perfect miniature Corvette is what someone looking for a miniature Corvette would find desirable. Which means maybe my seven year old heart wasn't necessarily sinning so much as it was casting one boy's vote for perfection.

There are other ways to struggle with perfection this time of year. Some of us are surely struggling not only with how to set the perfect table or find the perfect gift or dress your children up so as to appear reasonably perfect in church, but also with how to be perfectly joyful or perfectly content or deal perfectly with some failure or loss or grief amidst all the tinsel and obnoxious, abrasive good cheer. Perfection is a burden if it means to be free of flaws and to be pure. But what if a truth made incarnate for us in the birth of Jesus is that to be perfect in the eyes of God is to be thoroughly made?

St. Luke makes it clear. Jesus was born in the same broken world you and I inhabit, just in another time and place. It was a world of wars and imperial occupations, unhoused families and cruel public policy. Augustus the emperor was making decrees, registering subjects. There's no mention of the kingdom of God quite yet. Just that someone whose parents gave him the unfortunate name of Quirinius somehow rose to be governor of Syria in spite of it. Joseph's family line goes back to the great and morally complicated King David, but that won't ensure a room for the night, even if Mary, his betrothed, is great with child. The world Jesus is born into is not free of the flaws it's still burdened by. The same old flaws the prophets still demand we set ourselves to repairing.

But when Mary wrapped up her newborn baby against the cold that night, she enacted another familiar feature of our world, which is the love of a mother for her child simply for being the child he is. Someday I'm sure Mary will need that child to solve a problem for her, like, I don't know, turning a few vats of water into wine when a wedding party is running out of its juice. Someday she'll probably need her child to be something grand or important so she will feel a little grander or more important herself in a world that tells her she's worth next to nothing. I mean, it would boost any parent's ego for their firstborn to become the savior of the world.

But that first night, we don't need Luke to tell us any more than he does. We know Mary loved her child not because of who he would become one day, but simply because of who he was right then: a human infant, perfect simply because he was thoroughly and wondrously made. A mother's love is less a decision than a condition in such moments, wouldn't you agree?

And later on in his life, Mary's son will show us that such love need not be limited to the love of a mother for a child. He'll show us by challenging the old human tendency to confuse perfection with purity. He will reach out to the outcast and the unclean, to sinners and foreigners and heretics. He will touch them and heal them and listen to them and eat with them and do whatever embodied thing it takes to show them that they are worthy of love just as they are, just for being who they are by the perfect Love that made us all.

Christian Wiman once wrote, "God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made/ sing [God's] being simply by being/ the thing it is." Have you ever loved someone or even some thing simply and thoroughly for being who she was? Simply and thoroughly for being what it was? I know you have. You have loved someone or something with no need to possess, only to enjoy that, for all that's torn and broken in this world of governors and emperors and no vacancy signs on its inns, for all that's broken, a riven and beautiful thing can still sing God's being simply by being the thing it is. And so can you. For such love is what your Maker made you for.

Even at Christmas, unconditional divine love can seem like something meant for another realm, an ideal realm that it left behind when it paid us a visit once in Bethlehem way back when. It can seem impossible for the likes of us to comprehend, much less live out.

But the grace of Christmas is in part the reminder that you have known this love, just as Mary did, not as a concept or an ideal, but because some of it has passed into this world through you anytime you loved someone or something simply for being themselves. You and I and every child who's ever been filled with anticipation for what delight might await them in the morning have known a form of unconditional love. Jesus would just expand radically what and whom in this world we might come to love in just that unabashed way, as we come to trust that God loved each one of us in just that unabashed way first.

So Merry Christmas, friends. I hope yours is a perfect one. If you can't quite trust your own delight, let the delight of a child for something in this world be your guide. Remember what it means to love anything unconditionally, and then let unconditional love make your life more thoroughly into the one you already know deep within you it was meant by God to be.