

## CHRISTMAS DAY 2019

One of my favorite parts of Christmas is the giving and receiving of Christmas cards and letters. I almost always encounter at least one such greeting each year that makes an impact, and this year it was a card sent by Melanie McMillion, who gave me permission to mention it! On the front of the card that she and John sent out this year was this statement: “Where there is great love, there will always be miracles.” Hmm? Where there is great love, there will always be miracles. This notion grabbed hold of me for two reasons: First, it seemed to me to perfectly describe what the Incarnation of God in flesh is all about; the embodying of great love into a miracle birth. And secondly, it also seemed to me to describe the situation in the McMillion household and in other households like theirs, where one of the members of a couple or a family needs extra care, and another member of the couple or family is able to provide it. I thought about how well that has gone for John and Melanie; I thought about how my Mom was cared for by my Dad for another year and half in their apartment when the health professionals involved said it wouldn’t work; I thought of all kinds of situations that you would know of, too, where against all odds, love and care are extended to someone in need of them in a way that seems little short of miraculous. But this simple idea explains why that’s possible: Where there is great love, there will always be miracles.

Caught up in this notion, I spent much of Advent, the time before Christmas, on the look out for those miracles, and I saw them. Particularly I saw them even this past week, when our church and community were shocked and deeply saddened by the tragic death of Nick Ojard, 32 years old, in a snowmobiling accident. When I first learned of his death, I wondered how his

family could possibly cope with such a terrible tragedy. When we learned the service was to be two days ago, Dec. 23, I felt overwhelmed just thinking about the arrangements to be made, how the food could be provided, how the service could be put together, and all the elements that go into a larger service involving a tragic death, particularly two days before Christmas. But through all of this sorrow and turmoil, I was aware also of a strong and steady undercurrent of love. Of course Nick's family was devastated, but they also had faith and friends and other family members to support them and give them strength. Of course it's a terribly busy time of year to insert such a significant and sad occasion as a funeral of such magnitude, but everyone pulled together in the most amazing way to make it happen—to provide the space needed, the chairs set up, the food required, the words that would help-- and this church and community were able to provide a truly comforting and caring service to celebrate Nick's life, even as we grieved his death, and we did it in a way that seemed nearly miraculous,. But where there is great love, there will always be miracles.

A happier example of this truth was brought to my attention this past Sunday morning. A new member had noticed the traveling Holy Cow trophy that our congregation holds because of our financial gifts to fight world hunger. A longer time member, in the know, was explaining to them that we won the Holy Cow, Look What we Did for World Hunger trophy this past year, because out of 135 congregations in our Synod, this small congregation had the highest per capita giving to world hunger of any of them. We were 1<sup>st</sup> out of 135? Doesn't that seem remarkable? Nearly miraculous? But where there is great love, there will always be miracles.

How appropriate it is then, that the final candle which we lit on our Advent wreath this past Sunday, prior to today, was the Love Candle. The Pollard family did the devotional reading and lighting for us, and it was a great example of love right there to see the children involved in the lighting and reading, and to be so excited about it. Especially the youngest child, who had obviously been primed to speak her one memorized line at the proper time: ‘Let us pray’ she sang out enthusiastically, and so we did. And the prayer focused on the love of God which brings light into a world that is no stranger to tragic deaths, to hunger here and around the world, to prolonged illnesses that require prolonged care. And yet in the midst of all of that, how clear it is, that where there is great love, there will always be miracles.

Any number of times we are told in the Scriptures that God loves; and not only that God loves, but that God *is* love; the very essence of love. Which means that whenever we are a part of love, in giving, in receiving, in experiencing love, whether we realize it or not, we are participating in the life of God, we are having an experience of a spiritual nature, however we might name it or understand it. Because love is everywhere, just as God is; it is not confined or boxed in or compartmentalized, any more than God is. And yet today, as we celebrate this ancient feast of Christmas, the Nativity of our Lord, we are reflecting upon a specific instance where the greatness, the expansiveness of the love of God, created a particular and specific miracle, that of the Incarnation, of God taking on human flesh, of the birth of the Christ child.

That particular miracle of God’s love, which we heard described in our Gospel lesson from Luke this morning, is most simply and frequently portrayed through a nativity scene. Very likely, many of us have such scenes set up in our homes, our churches, or maybe life size figures

in our front yards. There is something deeply iconic about the Nativity scene as we usually see it. Think for a moment about the participants, as if seeing the scene for the first time: there are the parents and the baby; there are visitors of all stations of life, from lowly shepherds to exotic eastern magi; there are the animals of the stable-- chickens, sheep, cows; and perhaps there is also a brightly shining star or an angel suspended above, bringing with it that element of wonder, of divine intervention. A colleague last week was telling of how he attended seminary in Chicago, and he took a series of buses to get there, usually bringing along with him his 3 year old daughter to a nearby day care center. They typically had a wait time between buses, and so in cold weather they would go into a nearby Catholic church supply shop that was open and warm while they waited. Around Christmas time, this shop was filled with nativity sets, representative of all nationalities, ethnicities, and traditions. Exploring them filled my friend and his 3 year old daughter with wonder and delight, and in particular, my friend was amazed at how his daughter, even so young, could pick out who was who in everyone of the scenes, regardless of how they appeared or what nationality they represented. Again, I think that's because there is something so elemental to these scenes, that speaks to the very heart of us. What did that three year old see? She saw what we see. There is a young mother, having a baby under terribly inconvenient circumstances and conditions, having had to travel to a distant city as she is about to give birth, where the only lodging available is a stable. There is a probably slightly older father, doing his best to assist with birthing a baby, though it was likely not a part of skill set prior to this moment. Then there are the animals, the representatives of nature, a reminder that God's love for the world is not just about humanity, but about all of creation. There are the shepherds, humble, uneducated, rough-hewn folks who are the recipients of an astonishing message delivered by a

choir of angelic warriors and messengers; and there are the wise men, the magi, the kings from exotic eastern places, seekers who followed a star. In actuality, this last group probably showed up a bit later, but no matter—they are generally present in the Nativity scenes as we know and love them. So, it's truly an eclectic and democratic mix within that unlikely setting of a stable, which houses this miraculous expression of a love of God too big to be contained or constrained, the birth of Christ.

Think for a moment about the nativity scenes you see or put up or experience. There is, of course, the living nativity which our church sponsors for the Julebyen celebration, earlier in December. That live nativity includes church children, community children, animals from people's homes or hobby farms, whatever live baby we can come up with for the occasion, and it is always a delight, because it's so representative of our community. This year, I was struck by the sound of the train whistle in the background as the Nativity story was read, while the Christmas goose honked, and the goats were baa-ing, and our children were being children, sometimes standing in an appropriate position for the part they were playing, and other times wandering around to interact and take everything in themselves. And why not? This is us, I thought to myself, feeling deeply grateful. But it's *more* than us. This is *God*. This is *love*. This is the miracle that happens, because where there is great love, there will always be miracles.

Our church has a not-living nativity set of a much smaller scale set up in the window sill of the staircase leading downstairs. It's actually a lovely, white porcelain set, gifted to us by Doris Guse. And this year, the woman who set it up told me that she took a different approach--- she put all the animals up crowded around the manger in which the baby lay, so the people were

in the second tier of gathered figures, and she did it, she told me, just because she could. I, likewise, in the nativity scene set up on the mantle in my home also went for a slightly different arrangement this year. It occurred to me, as I was setting it up, that I always group the shepherds together on one side and the magi together on the other side, as two separate groups. So, seeking a bit of an ethnic and socioeconomic mix that I thought would be more God-pleasing and appropriate, I mixed it up a bit and put shepherds and magi in conversational groups together. Who cares if they were of different nationalities, one group wealthy and educated, one group poor and illiterate, and that they didn't speak each other's languages? Can't they still mingle and marvel together? Because if we can't discover each other in new ways and cross some boundaries around and within the nativity scene, then where and when can we? The Christmas event is the exact time and place this kind of mixing- it- up should happen, because where there is great love, there will always be miracles, and it takes a miracle for us to come together across the boundaries we too often set up that divide us from one another.

Going back to my friend and his 3 year old daughter, he noted how much she loved to move and position the nativity figures, almost like playing in a doll house. I'm thinking that her example of happy engagement with the scene is a wise one, and one that we should follow. Not only should we perhaps re-think how we position the figures in our nativities, we should engage with those scenes in such a way as to place ourselves there, too. ( Because if we aren't there, what's the point in our celebration of Christmas?) Where is our place in the nativity scene? Where would you be? Hanging outside shyly, looking through a window? Or inside, chatting up some exotic magi from Persia? Maybe over with the animals, scratching the donkey behind the ears? Or possibly even front and center, helping Mary and Joseph to swaddle the baby? Or

kneeling in wordless wonder before the baby in the cow's feeding trough? Where is our place in the scene? Because I think we want to be there. I honestly believe that's why we're here this morning; we want to experience something of that miracle, unlikely though it may seem that we---broken, confused, doubting, and cynical---may do so. I love the quote by C.S. Lewis, who wrote, "Amongst the asses, stubborn I as they, I see my savior, where I look for hay." We may only expect to find hay, but there among it, is the Savior. That ultimate expression of the truth that where there is great love, there will always be miracles. Regardless of what we bring with us in heart and mind to this service today, there is a place for us in that Nativity scene. And just as every Sunday we hear the words prior to Holy Communion---this is not our table, it is the Lord's table, and all are welcome---we can as confidently say---this is not our nativity scene, it is the Lord's nativity scene, and all are welcome. No exceptions. Because the love of God, too great to be contained apart from the miracle of Incarnation, is for everyone. No exceptions. It is for everyone, and it is for you. May we all enter the Nativity Scene this Christmas and discover what it means to be loved. Amen.