

## **Out of the Manger and into the World**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 6:1-11

When my in-laws lived in Holland we used to visit Eighth Street at least once during Christmastime. It was always a nice place to visit. The Chamber of Commerce decorated everything very tastefully. There were often carolers or some kind of musical group playing. I remember one time they even had chestnuts roasting on an open fire. It was cozy and fun. We went into our favorite stores too. Our kids favorite store was, of course, the peanut store with its old time candy. Our favorite was The Bridge, the non-profit store full of artifacts and crafts made in developing countries. Every Christmas, The Bridge had an extensive collection of crèches. Every year there was an extensive collection of manger scenes from all over the world, each of them depicting Mary and Joseph and the Christ child differently. They used varied artistic materials, they depicted the holy family in different dress. They even showed the holy family in different skin tones: in the South American crèches they look South American, in the African crèches they look African. The whole display was a lot of fun. And of course, Linda and I didn't just look, we sometimes bought. I think we have 3 or 4 examples of crèches bought from the Bridge.

Obviously I have an affection for crèches, but I also have a sense that they represent a limitation in the way we celebrate Christmas. I love crèches. I'll probably continue to buy them and admire them, but I do it recognizing that there is both good and bad in the crèche tradition. At their best, they can be a reminder of the wonderful news that Jesus came to this earth for us. At their best, they can remind us of the miracle of the incarnation. At their best they make Christ's coming visual and vivid for us and for our children. At their worst, they can make Christmas overly sentimental, at their worst they can cutesify our faith. Anytime you turn Jesus into a decorative object you are on dangerous ground.

Another way of saying this: At their worst, crèches start messing with the second commandment. You remember the second commandment. You shall not make for yourselves graven images. Now, I'm not saying that crèches are graven images, but I am saying that the concerns in the second commandment can come into play with our Christmas decorations.

The second commandment prohibits visual images of God the Father, because how can you contain the infinite glory, the ineffable majesty of God in a wooden statue or a painting? God will always be infinitely more than you can possibly imagine. In the same way, when we make Jesus' birth into a decorative object, we run the risk of turning the glorious mystery of the incarnation into a bit of tasteful décor. Instead of a glorious, life-changing mystery, you have something small and cute and safe, that fits on a mantle.

Of course this isn't just a danger with crèches; this is a danger with the entire Christmas season. I don't mean to pick on one particular decoration here. What people do with crèches is what people do with the entire Christmas season. The great mystery of the incarnation, the wild wonder of God coming to earth, becomes a warm fuzzy celebration of hearth and home. Nothing against hearth and home—I spent my fair share of time at home in front of the hearth this season and I plan to do the same next year—but Christmas isn't about family and food and coziness; Christmas is about the great world-shaking power of the incarnation.

There's a reason that, of all the Christian celebrations, the world finds Christmas the easiest to embrace. Because at Christmastime, lying there in a manger, while He's still a little baby, Jesus still feels manageable. He's cute and cuddly and you can pinch his little pink cheeks. He's not going to get up and tell you an uncomfortable parable. He's not going to tell you to repent. Lying there in the manger in one of those crèche scenes, Jesus is cuddly and safe.

By the time we get to Luke 6, Jesus isn't so cute and cuddly anymore. And he's not safe. He's out of the manger and into the world. And He's starting to shake things up. By the time we get to our passage, Jesus has only been at ministry for two chapters. The public ministry of Jesus starts in the middle of Luke 4 so Jesus is just getting started. He's only been at it for a two and a half chapters. Look back over those two and a half chapters and you'll see that Jesus has been anything but cute and safe. In that short time, He causes a minor riot in his hometown when He preaches a sermon so incendiary they wanted to throw Him off a cliff, He's upset the comfortable lives of some fishermen by calling them to follow Him. (Peter was so disturbed by Jesus' call, he actually got on his knees and asked Jesus to go away). He's scandalized the establishment by not only eating with tax collectors and sinners, but also by inviting them to join his little group. He got the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ticked off when He claimed to have the authority to forgive sins. He further upsets them by the way He and His disciples choose to observe the Sabbath. Jesus is out of the manger and into the world and He's getting less safe and less cute by the day.

The pattern continues in our passage. A man is in need. He has a withered hand. Jesus sees it and He is determined to help. He doesn't hang back; Jesus gets involved. It's not the safe thing to do. The opinion of other people is against Him—the scribes and the Pharisees are watching Him. The weight of tradition is against Him—this is against the rules! But in spite of this Jesus gets involved; He heals the man on the Sabbath. And the scribes and the Pharisees are not amused, they do not want to pinch His cheeks; they are filled with fury and discussed what they might do to Jesus. This baby does not stay in the manger; this baby gets involved.

Why does Jesus cause so much trouble so quickly? Does He just like stirring the pot? No, I don't think that's what's going on here. There are some people who just love to tweak authority, who just love to upset the apple cart. You're in a conversation with them and you will make a point and they will immediately say the opposite just to see how you react. There are some people who have a revolutionary, anti-establishment personality. I don't think that's Jesus necessarily. What drives Jesus is not a distaste for the establishment; what drives Jesus to get involved, what moves Him out of the manger and into the world, is love. Jesus doesn't heal the man because He's trying to aggravate the Pharisees; Jesus heals the man because He saw the man with the hand and wanted to help. Jesus doesn't associate with the tax collectors and sinners to make decent people mad; He does it because He loves these sinners. He wants to save them. Jesus really, really loves people, and when you really, really love people and you love them in an incarnational way, when you love them in a way that is determined to get to the bottom of their pain and their brokenness, things get messy. To use the imagery of this service: We light a cozy candle to signify Christ's coming at Christmas, but the fuel of this fire is love and that love is so intense that very soon that little candle becomes a raging, purifying fire. It's what John the Baptist predicted: After me will come one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!

Anyone here who's practiced any kind of incarnational love knows this. Years ago, my mother got involved with an aging neighbor, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith was a widow who had no children and no siblings. She was a person who literally had no family left in the world. When

her husband died, my mother reached out to her with help and companionship. It turned out to be way more complicated than she thought. Mrs. Smith was a difficult woman. She was occasionally grateful for my mom's help, but most of the time she was ornery and sharp. As she aged, the kind of help she needed became more complicated. At the beginning mom would come over for the occasional tea, but later there would be daily calls, regular needs, phone calls in the middle of the night because she'd fallen in the bathroom and needed help getting up. Eventually Mrs. Smith entered a supportive care facility. My mother was the point person in convincing her to leave her home, dealing with the move, calling the lawyers to make sure everything was in order. Later she dealt with the nursing home, confronting the establishment there when Mrs. Smith's care wasn't right. I don't mean to make my mother into some great saint. Believe me, she's an ordinary Christian woman. I only mean to say that this is how it is with incarnational love. This is how it is when you get involved. Bring over a casserole and invite a person to tea, let yourself really love another person and you never know what you'll get.

I began this sermon talking about how crèches can make Jesus cute and safe. Let me tell you a different kind of crèche story. A better one. Years ago the Toronto Globe and Mail published the story of a young father from Calgary who bought a crèche set for his family. The only problem was that he was the father of two young daughters. These daughters loved to play with dolls. So these girls would not let the Baby Jesus stay in the manger. Baby Jesus was taken out and got involved with all the other toys. "The baby Jesus ended up visiting with our Lego populace. He frequented the company of stuffed animals, despite the immense difference in scale. Another time, I found Jesus stuffed into the chimney of a dollhouse. He was helping Santa, the kids explained. I found Jesus driving the Barbie Corvette with Barbie, down at the end of the hall." It was out of the manger and into the streets for this household's Jesus. And then the inevitable happened. In the rough and tumble of play, in the rough and tumble of the streets, Jesus broke. His body broke right in half.

At first the dad was angry. The family's pretty little crèche set was ruined! He thought his daughters had done something completely inappropriate with the baby Jesus. Later, however he changed his mind. Because this is exactly how the story goes, isn't it? The baby goes out of the manger and into the world and His body gets broken.

That's what happens when you get involved. Jesus looks so cute lying there in the manger, wrapped up in those swaddling clothes, with those red cheeks. But deep love, incarnational love, involved love will lead Him away from that manger and so in the end people won't pinch His chubby little cheeks, they will slap them and this little child will end up nailed to a cross. For us. For our salvation.

I hope you had a lot of warm fuzzy times this holiday. I hope you spent a good deal of time at home in front of a hearth. I hope there were lots of Christmas decorations to make you feel cozy. But now the season is drawing to an end. Time to put the decorations away. Time to leave the manger. On Christmas Eve we lit this candle to celebrate the coming of our Lord into the world. Since then this cozy little flame has burned in our midst reminding us of that blessed event. That silent night when all was calm and all was bright, and the infant was tender and mild. Tonight the flame of this candle will grow. It will move out of the cradle and into the world. And while it won't become a raging fire exactly, it will become something that fills this place. And when every candle in this place is lit, it will remind us that the love that caused Jesus to come to this world is much too strong to be contained in this small circle. This light and this love will fill this place, and it will flow out from this place, and it will fill this world. It will shake kingdoms, it

will uproot sins, it will transform lives it will make all things new. Praise God for his love's wild and unquenchable light.

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