

“Our Christmas Story”

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Matthew 12:46-50

*“46 While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ 48 But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ 49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”*

There are some things about the Christmas season that likely started as innocent traditions, but that over the years have morphed from simple tradition to cultural institution. Take for example young Children going to get their picture taken with Santa Claus, leaving out Milk and Cookies on Christmas Eve, going to church for candlelit services where Silent Night is sung, eating too much, spending too much, the Salvation Army bell ringers, and Christmas lighting ceremonies to name just a few. One of my favorites of all these traditions is the regularity with which some popular Christmas movies are shown. The same time each year, the same network, the same clips used in commercials, we could set our holiday clocks by the showing of some of these films.

And so this Advent, Steve and I decided to put together a sermon series that looked at some of these popular Hollywood tales of Christmas celebrations. Part of our hope is that taking the time on Sunday mornings to look at these films in some depth will impact the way you see them this holiday season and for years to come. We hope that for many of you these films will take on a deeper meaning so that as you see them and think about them and hear others talk about them you’ll be able to connect these holiday stories to the greater story of God’s work in the world and in our lives.

Last week Steve began our series by talking about the Classic film, “The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street.” There are so many neat scenes and moments in this film, but Steve lifted up the thought that the true Miracle is when, in their own ways, Fred and Doris both learn to believe. The connection to our own lives then is that miracles can and do happen all around us, especially when we learn to believe – even in those things that common sense might tell us not to believe. And so this Christmas season and beyond we hope that you would all have your eyes opened to the small miracles that surround us every day here on 35<sup>th</sup> Street and everywhere.

As a high school student on the speech team in Tonganoxie, KS I competed for a season using a great story by Jean Shepherd. I have been a fan of his work ever since. So I can’t tell you how excited I was when I moved to Northwest Indiana and began to learn about Shepherd’s connection to the area. I was especially excited the first time I watched “A Christmas Story” after moving to the area and was able to make connections with streets and schools and neighborhoods. And as I reflected on this film these past couple of weeks I found myself thinking that this truly is a timeless and classic film – a movie produced in 1983, telling the story of Christmas in the late 40’s, that is as popular as it has even been in December of 2006.

Shepherd’s story is at its core about young Ralphie Parker and his quest to get an “Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle” for Christmas. This simple story is one that has a way of connecting with viewers of all ages and one that has become a cult classic, gathering a greater and greater following in recent years. For the last decade or so TBS has shown the movie around the clock for 24 hours as Christmas Eve turns into Christmas day. This year Cingular has put together a very

well done commercial parody of the film where young Ralphie's only desire is to receive a Motorola c139 with texting, games, and graphics. And in true Christmas story fashion Ralphie's mom, school teacher and Santa all chime in with the refrain, "you'll run the bill up."

It is now a timeless movie that, while not being a huge hit when first released, has become a part of the American Christmas Institution. The movie is full of memorable things from the great narration done by Jean Shepherd himself to some specific things: the leg lamp that Mr. Parker wins as the major award, young Randy's inability to put his arms down because he is bundled up so tightly, Flick getting his tongue stuck to a flag pole and being abandoned by his friends as the recess bell rings, and young Ralphie getting his mouth washed out with soap for a slight slip of the tongue.

While the overall plot of the movie is about young Ralphie's struggle to get what he wants for Christmas there is an overarching theme that runs much deeper than this simple struggle. We see it in Miss Shield's interactions with her students, we see it when Mr. Parker is standing out in the driveway admiring his new Major Award and talking with the neighbors, we see it in the way that the Parker's react with the Bumpus's dogs get into their home – clearly not for the first time, we see it in the way the young children interact with one another on their walk to school each day, and we see it in the way that Ralphie protects his little brother and his friends in the face of bullies. One of the greatest things we can get from this film is a lesson about the importance of community in shaping our lives.

Part of why I think that this film – so full of images and interactions that deal with community – has become so popular is that it reminds us of a time that used to be, a time

when we knew our neighbors, interacted with them on a regular basis, and knew that we were all responsible together for the well being of our community, our kids, and one another. With few exceptions, this is not the world we live in today. As the world has changed over the last several decades we have become increasingly isolated from one another – we often don't know anything about our neighbors beyond their names, we don't interact with the families and kids who live the closest to us, and as we interact less and less with our neighbors and with others around us families increasingly have to bear the burden of raising kids on their own. Family has become narrowly defined as the few people who live in our home isolated from others by locks, fences, security systems, and gates.

As people of faith this is something that should be concerning to us. Faith and life in relationship with God are at their best about connections, about our relationships with others, about mutual care for the well being of our neighbors and all persons within our communities. Family is something that, at its best, is much bigger and expansive than our biological relatives. This is one thing that Jesus reminds us of during this holiday season. In a story from the Gospel of Matthew we overhear part of a conversation that Jesus has about the idea of family (Matthew 12:46-50):

*“While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”*

To fully understand what is going on with this text and the impact that it has for our conversation about family and community today let's take just a minute to look at its context. In his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, M. Eugene Boring – yes that's actually his name, shares that this is the first time since the birth story of Jesus that Jesus' mother has played a role in the gospel and that this is the only reference in the gospel of Matthew made to Jesus' siblings. The reference to Jesus' mother and siblings here is simply to show that family relationships aren't to be seen as any more important than our relationships with others in the Christian community. Boring explains that, "Matthew's point is that those who have accepted Jesus' message, and thereby have been called to place the kingdom of God above even family loyalties, as he himself had done, have found a new family in the community of disciples...." As people who say that we want to follow Christ this text has some pretty hard hitting implications for our lives today both generally and specifically.

Generally this text has some profound implications. Jesus is teaching against a self-centered clan mentality and he is promoting a more universal love. Jesus' teaching, life, and ministry reached out to and included outsiders and this teaching is a call for us as his followers to do the same. Think about it, even the meanest nastiest, most vile person – a mass-murderer or rapist or molester – can love their mom and their own family or tribe or nation. The call of Jesus in general is for us to find ways to reach out to others – even if they're different, even if they bother us, even if we don't know them or think that we don't like them – and to offer them love and support as a part of our community.

On a general level I imagine that it is easy enough for us to agree with this idea that yes, being clickish and clannish and exclusive is bad, we should be accepting. On a

practical level though, this teaching of Jesus presents some real challenges for us as individuals and as a community of faith.

Steve told a story last week about a family who visited a church and was all but ignored as church members hustled and bustled around them, too busy doing their own things to even take the time to greet a guest, to see if they had any questions, to help them find where they were going for educational opportunities, worship, or anything else. As a busy and active church we have a lot of great things going on, but the danger is that we get so busy ourselves we forget to look out into our community, to the needs of others, even to those who walk through our doors on a Sunday morning.

It has been said that the church is a unique organization because it is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of persons who are not yet members. Let me say that again – the church exists for the sake of persons who are not yet members. This means that we as a congregation meet on Sunday mornings and gather during the weeks here on the corner of 35<sup>th</sup> and Columbia not simply for our own sakes. Yes, we all need to grow in our understanding God and our relationship with God and the fellowship opportunities, and studies and worship services provide important ways for us to do that. However, if that is all we are about – if we are simply in the business of doing things for our own sake, we have ceased to become the church, the body of Jesus Christ in the world today. Our calling as the church is to study and grow in our relationship with God so that we can touch lives and make a difference in the lives of people who aren't a part of the church.

So what does all of this mean? Ask yourselves a couple of questions for me. How many new people have you introduced yourself to at church in the last two months?

We have had nearly 25 visitors sign in over the last three months – and even more who didn't register their attendance. And outside of these people there are times between services and around the coffee pot and at church functions that you have the opportunity to run into people whose name and story you don't know. How many people with whom you don't already have a relationship have you engaged inside of these church walls in the last two months?

And outside of these church walls, how many people have you made eye contact with or greeted on the street, in the grocery store, or while out running errands? How long have you spent in conversation with the people who live on either side of you? How many kids in your neighborhood have you smiled at, spent time with, or given a gift to? And how many people have you told about Ridge UMC, invited to come to worship, offered to pick up and bring with you to worship or some other activity at the church?

The reality of life is that we fall into our routines and our comfort zones. That we greet and talk to the people we know and with whom we are comfortable. People today are hesitant to talk about church or extend an invitation. And I know, I know – the world has changed, it's not like it used to be, people might think that you're weird if you approach them, smile at them, invite them to church. You're right – they might think you're weird. And you know what, people thought Jesus was weird, people didn't like his inclusiveness, they didn't like his generous love that broke down boundaries, they didn't like the way he believed that God's love was open to all people. But even though people thought Jesus was weird, we are still here this morning, some two thousand years later, we are gathered in his name for worship growth and fellowship.

About a year and a half ago my dad shared with me the information from the Tipping Point that is printed in your bulletin this morning – and I still find it remarkable... Children from bad families with good community support have a better chance of succeeding in life than children from good families with poor community support. Our calling as followers of Christ to be good neighbors, to be supportive community, to be extended family to the children as well as the parents, grandparents and other individuals in our community is huge.

And so this Advent – as we await the coming of the Christ-child in the world, we have a calling, to break down our clannish in-group/out-group mentality. We have a calling to live as the church for the sake of those women, men, and children who are not yet a part of our church, but nonetheless should be a part of our lives. The support of a church for individuals and members within the greater community, relationships growing out of a love for God and a desire to serve one another, hospitality that opens doors, extends warm smiles, that truly cares this could be “Our Christmas Story” this year.