

## **Christmas Eve**

John 1:4-5

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

There are Christmas Eve traditions we look forward to every year, and maybe even more so this year.

Perhaps the most beloved of all is lighting our candles and followed by the singing of "Silent Night".

After missing out on the candlelight Christmas service last year, I am thankful we are gathered here in person to continue that beloved tradition, even if this year we are using battery-operated candles.

Besides singing "Silent Night," one of my other favorite Christmas Eve traditions took place in the church where I grew up and in a few that I have served. This was having an individual sing "O Holy Night."

Growing up, it was Frank Johnson in his deep baritone voice, singing "O Holy Night" each Christmas Eve. Later, while serving in Marshfield, it was Ken Zittleman, and when Ken's voice could no longer sing it, a young man named Joe Gustafson and his sister stepped in to sing. While Frank and Ken both sang a more traditional version, Joe, playing his guitar, and his sister singing with him sang a more contemporary version of "O Holy Night."

It has been over a decade since I have heard "O Holy Night" sung in church, yet, each time I hear it on the radio (streaming service), I still hear each of these people singing it.

There is one particular verse in this beautiful song, that touches my heart and speaks to my faith, and has helped to shape my ministry and life. Listen to these words from the third verse: "Truly Christ taught us to love one another; His law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the enslaved are our family; and in his name, all oppression shall cease."

For me, these words speak to the reason we have gathered this day to light our candles, and in our singing, bear witness to as people who indeed believe, "Christ taught us to love one another."

Can I get a Christmas "Amen!"

So if he taught us to love one another, and his law is love and his gospel is peace, why do we who believe this struggle to love as he taught us?

We have been in the midst of this pandemic for coming up on two years. Over 800,000 people have died from COVID; worldwide close to 5 and half million. And yet, some people do not believe that this virus is real.

The other day, a Fox News host encouraged his viewers to ambush Dr. Fauci and post “kill shot” videos of them taking aim at him.

“Truly, he taught us to love one another.” Didn’t he?

Americans are divided over wearing masks and getting the vaccine as are we, literally, as our church straddles the line between two counties. Standing in the pulpit, I am in Jefferson County and most of you sitting in the pews are in Dane County. We are abiding by the Dane County Mask Mandate. Jefferson County has no mask requirement. As a church, we are doing so out of love and care for our neighbors, thought to say that even in a church, is taken by some to be a political statement and divisive.

Parents show up at school board meetings, even here in Cambridge and where I live in McFarland, confronting school administrators over masks, threatening to do physical harm, even posting death threats over their children having to wear masks. And then, ironically, some of those same parents have had their children in Christmas pageants celebrating the birth of the One who taught us to love one another.

What does it mean to us when we say, “Truly, Christ taught us to love one another?”

Our hospitals are filling back up, our health care workers are stressed out, teachers are stressed, ministers too, as are many of you.

I had a doctor’s appointment the other day. As we were talking, I asked how she was doing. Stressed, as you might expect. She then told me about a recent experience a nurse had when prepping a patient. She asked if the person had been vaccinated, and the patient, not wearing a mask, spit on her.

“Truly, he taught us to love one another, didn’t he?”

In the midst of this pandemic, gun sales have skyrocketed, as have shootings. In the season of Christmas, when we speak of love and peace, and goodwill to all, two politicians, following yet another school shooting, posed their families holding assault weapons, sending Christmas greetings.

“Truly, he taught us to love one another, or am I missing the message of Christ’s birth and Christmas?”

Fredrick Backman, writing in his book “Beartown” says: “Hate can be a deeply stimulating emotion. The world becomes easier to understand and much less terrifying if you divide everything and everyone into friends and enemies, we and they, good and evil. The easiest way to unite a group isn't

through love, because love is hard, It makes demands. Hate is simple. So the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe - comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal. The third is that we dehumanize our enemy.”

News anchor Brian Williams, when signing off for the last time offered these words about the spreading darkness in our nation: But the darkness on the edge of town has spread to the main roads and highways and neighborhoods. It is now at the local bar and the bowling alley, at the school board and the grocery store. And it must be acknowledged and answered for.”

The reason we have gathered here tonight isn't just to light candles and sing “Silent Night,” though it is that too.

No, the reason we have gathered here as followers of Christ have done so for centuries is to acknowledge that darkness of hatred, injustice, violence, and oppression, and make answer to it.

That is why we light our candles - battery operated or with a real flickering flame. They are merely symbolic of the light that shines in the darkness born in the infant baby Jesus who grew to teach us how to love one another.

We are here tonight because we believe that the same sacred light, shines in and through each and every person.

We have gathered to bear witness to that light through our liturgy, our carols, the story, and our singing.

There is risk in our doing so and not just at contracting the virus in a crowded sanctuary. No, when we light our candles, we are making a radical faith statement, yes, even a political one.

We are saying to the political leaders and powers on earth and to people everywhere, that we will not let their threats of hate, fear and violence, and oppression have the last word.

So if we believe, “he truly taught us to love another, and that his love is law and his gospel is peace” then I will invite you in a moment to join me in lighting our candles as a radical act of faith in Christ and the love we are to bear witness to this night and every day.

Amen.