Christmas 2023

MDP of God

 I recently came across a story told by a teacher named Betty : she says,

Matthew was a 10 year old orphanwho lived with his aunt—his aunt was a bitter, middle aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister’s son.

She never failed to remind young Matthew, *if it hadn’t been for her generosity*, he would be a vagrant on the streets. *Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.*

Betty said, “I hadn’t noticed Matthew particularly until he began staying after class each day-- [at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger I had learned later] –he wanted to help me, his teacher, straighten up the room.

Betty said-we did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When we did talk, *Matthew spoke mostly of his mother.*

Though he was quite young when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman who always spent time with him.

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As Christmas drew near however, Matthew failed to stay after school each day. Betty said --I looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, I stopped him one afternoon and asked him why he no longer helped me in the room.

I told him how I had missed him, and his large brown eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, ‘***Did you really miss me***?’

Betty said --I explained how he had been my best helper, *‘I was making you a surprise,’* he whispered confidentially. ‘*It’s for Christmas.’* With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Matthew crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. *‘I have your present,’* he said timidly when I looked up. *‘I hope you like it.’* He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

‘It’s beautiful, Matthew. Is there something in it?’ I asked opening the top to look inside. *‘****Oh you can’t see what’s in it,’*** he replied, ***‘and you can’t touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mom always said it makes you feel good all the time, warm on cold nights and safe when you’re all alone.’***

I gazed into the empty box. ‘What is it, Matthew’ I asked gently, ‘that will make me feel so good?’

‘**It’s love**,’ he whispered softly, ‘*and mom always said it’s best when you give it away.*’ He turned and quietly left the room.

Betty concluded her story by saying, “so now I keep a small box crudely made of scraps of wood on the piano in my living room and only smile when inquiring friends raise quizzical eyebrows when I explain to them that there’s love inside it”

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My dear friends, *Christmas is all about love*

About the God who loves us so much that He humbled Himself to become one of us

And not only did He become one of us – He’d eventually open His arms on the cross- *He’d suffer and die so that you and I could be saved*

*And even beyond that* – He’d humble Himself so much – that He’d come in the form of bread and wine – so that He could enter into the life of each and everyone of us

It fact right from the beginning – Jesus was pointing us to that incredible mystery of the Holy Eucharist---How’s that?

He was born in Bethlehem- the name Bethlehem means “house of bread” – immediately after His birth He was placed in a feeding trough---**WHY?**

*Because right from the very beginning He was pointing us to the fact that He is the Bread of Life who came down from heaven and he who eats His Body and drinks His Blood* – **will have eternal life**

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My friends, this mystery of God’s love has transformed millions of lives – in fact it’s what transformed western civilization

In the days of Jesus a large percentage of the Empire were slaves- the Romans crucified people regularly – there are stories of miles and miles of crosses all with people on them, when there may have been an uprising in some city

You had people going to the coliseum and other places to see gladiators kill each other- they would give a thumbs up or thumbs down choosing whether people lived or died--- *and that was entertainment*

How did the western world go from such a violent- vicious – callous people – to a culture where there’s a safety net for the poor- where the handicapped are valued and cared for- where women and children are loved and respected instead of being seen as property--- where forgiveness occurs between nations that had been at war so that they could become allies?

 **It was teaching of Jesus** --- whose birth as little baby we celebrate today

He taught us to love one another as He loved us- that whatever we do to the least of His brothers and sisters we do to Him-*if we want to enter into the glory of heaven that we need to be willing to forgive*

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The world was filled with darkness and He brought the light of God’s love

So many lived with a total sense of gloom, but He brought tremendous joy and great rejoicing

His dominion is vast and forever peaceful

He taught us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age

*He transformed the world with His command of love* – **with His example of love**

He gave and gave and gave of Himself *and He taught you and me to follow His example*

*My friends, we live in a very foolish age-* there are actually people out there who believe that without Jesus we can be a civilization of love

 That without Jesus- we would somehow be better off

There are many who foolishly believe that the teaching of God limits us – restricts us – keeps us from reaching our full potential --- *and that without faith we could reach great heights of human potential—***That’s nonsense**

The 20th century showed what happens to a culture that rejects Christ

Hitler rejected Christ and left millions of dead in His wake

Stalin rejected the things of God- and again he left tens of millions of dead

Mao in China- Pol Pot in Cambodia- Castro in Cuba----- the list goes on and on of how low humanity can fall without Jesus

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My friends – *that’s true of civilization* – **but it’s also true in individual lives**

 Without Jesus in our lives we can’t love as we need to love

Without Jesus, the love of husbands and wives will be less then it could have been—parents and children will be less then it could have been

Before Christianity wives and children were seen as the property of the husband and father*- with Jesus there’s equality*—*where men are called, not to Lord over their families*, **but to give of themselves in love** (*that was a new concept with Jesus*)

But as many people get away from Jesus- *we see less of a willingness of people to give of themselves in love for their families*—we see more and more exploitation of women and children- we see more and more crime///- more and more people in jail- more and more people make irresponsible and unloving choices

While Christianity has never been perfectly lived in society or even in the lives of most Christians (after all we all fail to one degree or another)—when Jesus was more at the center of the culture there was greater respect in families- a greater respect between men and women- a greater respect between parents and children

As the culture pulls away from Jesus – as more and more individuals pull away from Jesus--- we see greater exploitation- greater neglect – greater refusal to be faithful to lifetime commitments

My friends- Jesus makes all the difference in the world

He’s the source of love – especially as the Bread of life who shares His life with us- so that we can love more like Him

*He’s done so much for us*—**and all He wants is for us to love Him Back**

**And what’s not to love?**

 He gave us life

He gave most of us the ability to walk and talk—to taste and smell---to see and to hear

He gives us [people who love us—and people that we love

Then He humbled Himself to become one of us

Then He embraced the cross and suffered an agonizing death so we can be forgiven

Then He’s given us His Wisdom in the form of His laws so that we can avoid the pitfalls of life—and learn how to live lives of love

 **So what’s not to love?**

The little baby who’s birth we celebrate today- transformed western civilization – He transforms individual lives – He transforms families--- if we but open our hearts to His saving grace

My friends, on this Christmas- lets allow Jesus to be at the center of our lives- so that we can learn to love as He loves

 God bless you and Merry Christmas!