

The Gift of Love
Matthew 2:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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It was 1958. Richard and Mildred were in love and decided to get married. An occasion of joy for most, was however the start of a long battle for them.

After all this was Richard and Mildred Loving - he a white man, she a woman of African American and Native American ancestry - who lived in Virginia, a state with laws against interracial marriage. So, only five weeks after going to Washington D.C. to be legally married, they were arrested. The wedding was legal, but their marriage - in the state of Virginia - was not.

Their story became well known as the legality of their marriage was at the center of the 1967 Supreme Court decision where, “in a unanimous decision, the justices found that Virginia’s interracial marriage law violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution” (<https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement/loving-v-virginia>).

While we like to think of hearts and happily-ever-afters when we talk about love, the reality is that love is not always easy, but sometimes love can be scary. And just as it may be difficult for us to understand what it was about Richard and Mildred Loving building a life together that frightened people, it is also difficult to understand what about a newborn baby was so scary to the powers-that-be in Jerusalem some two thousand years ago.

Yet, Lindsey reminded us that Herod and “all Jerusalem with him” (as Matthew writes) were frightened when these wise people came to town asking about a newborn king.

And while we know this part of the story, the reality is that we are more likely to read right past it. After all, we are more comfortable welcoming the wise men into our nativity scenes and talking about how they represent that God’s love is for the entire world. And that message is one that it is important to hear.

Especially in days when polarization seems to be ever increasing, when borders are too often drawn, when language of us and them is too common - it is important for us to welcome both the shepherds and the wise foreigners. It is important for us to remember that the story of God’s love coming in the flesh is a story not only for the insiders and the elite, not only for people who look and think like us, but for the outsiders, the pushed aside, and those from far away.

So, we want our wise men to join our shepherds in our nativity scenes. But what we don’t want is to be so comfortable with this scene that we forget to be shocked, or even a little scared, by it.

Because friends, love can be scary.

It can be scary in ways we need to confess - the kind of scary that worries about the power we will lose if we allow someone new or something different. That's the fear of the system in 1958 that arrested Richard and Mildred rather than celebrating with them...that's the fear of Herod who put out a decree that meant death for infant boys rather than choosing the love that came to life in Jesus.

But there's another way that love can be scary, too. A different kind of scary - the kind that is easier to ignore. Because we know that we don't want to be scared in the ways of power grabbing rulers or racist systems. But, too often we forget that what God's love asks of us may leave us trembling in a different way.

See, it's easy to look at our nativities and to celebrate the different kinds of people who showed up when Jesus was young. It's easy to read the stories of Jesus and to hear him welcoming us and others as well. It's easy even to read the stories of Jesus' death and to accept that the cross was his fate, his gift, intended for the good of the world.

But, the story into which we are invited as we anticipate the coming of Jesus is not a story of a hearts-and-candies kind of love. It is not a story of an easy love without event or conflict. It is not a story simply of someone who came to save us from ourselves and our sin. It is more than that.

The story of the love we know in Jesus is a story of radical love being shared with abandon. And it is a story we are not only invited to witness, but to live.

As we travel on the way to Bethlehem, preparing to hear the story of Jesus' birth again, we aren't just traveling to a place of remembering something that happened once upon a time, long ago. We aren't just going to the theatre to watch a meaningful production.

Rather, we are invited to come to Bethlehem, not only to see, but to be changed...to become people who not only admire Jesus but who live in his ways...to become people who not only experience the love of God but who are willing to love like God, even when it scares us, even when it means risk for us, even when it makes us ask difficult questions or change our minds.

Friends, this is the kind of love to which we are called.

It is a love that welcomes the friend and the stranger. It is a love that celebrates that the first announcement went not to the rich and powerful but to the lowly shepherds. It is a love that knows that there are many ways to find God and some of them require long journeys from foreign places. It is a love that is willing to give something up for the good of another. It is a love that doesn't let fear take hold but instead sees the possibilities that exist when we step outside our comfort zone and meet someone new, even become someone new. It is a love that changes the rules, that calls us beyond what

we've always known or done to something more, that doesn't cling to power but willingly shares it.

Yes, the wise men remind us that God's love is for everyone. But they also challenge us to live in the ways of Jesus and to love with God's love.

What if we not only affirmed God's love for everyone during worship, but what if we lived it in our daily interactions? What if it was a driving force in the decisions we make with our votes and our pocketbooks? What if everything we did began with the question, "How does this show God's love?"

As we prepare to hear again the story of Jesus' birth, how would our lives be different if we made a commitment to not only receive for ourselves but to share the expansive and generous love of our God? How would the world be changed if even just a few of us worked to live more fully in the ways of Jesus? What risks would we be willing to take if we decided to truly walk in his ways? The love of God is not only ours to receive, but it comes with a responsibility to share. After all, the gift of love is a gift for us *and* it is a gift to share with everyone.

May it be so.