

## *The Cost of Christmas*

John 1:1-14

December 25, 2011

Wow! It's finally here! Or, it's finally over, depending on what way you want to look at it. Yes, the shopping is done, for many the presents already opened, the Christmas pageants and concerts finished, all the parties and get togethers attended. In the wake of it all two things are abundantly clear. Jesus has arrived and his birthday usually breaks the bank. Christmas is costly! But look at the bright side. It could be much worse.

Each year PNC Financial services, one of the nation's largest banks, compiles what it calls the "True Cost of Christmas," an accurate, although tongue and cheek, analysis of what it would cost us, in the current marketplace, to celebrate all 12 days of Christmas according to the popular carol. Each year PNC analyzes the cost of such things as turtledoves and golden rings as well as the going rate for milkmaids and leaping lords. And this year, according to their findings, Christmas would cost around \$100,000! A hundred grand! Anybody here this morning spend close to that this Christmas? Or perhaps you spent closer to the \$400-\$500 average that U.S. households spend on Christmas. Any way you wrap it, Christmas is a costly holiday. Usually when we think of the cost of Christmas we think of what it cost us financially – usually by what has come out of our wallets or in the form of the credit card statements which will soon come.

But, as we have learned from our *Advent Conspiracy* series leading into this morning, the true cost of Christmas is not measured in just what is required of us financially. The true cost of Christmas is measured in what it required of Christ and what it demands of us – relationally: Relationally with God and with others. The four themes of the Advent Conspiracy were:

*WORSHIP FULLY* – about our relationship with God

*SPEND LESS* – money on "presents"

*GIVE MORE* - "presence" with others

*LOVE ALL* –

The Christmas season demands that a great deal of time, effort, and emotional energy be poured into relationships.

Here's a question: What if we, with what's left of the holiday season, did whatever we could to maximize our relational cost? What if we went out of our way to connect with others in truly meaningful and memorable ways? What if we invested in relationships in ways that mimic the movement of God and Christ towards us? What if?

If we want to see that kind of costly connecting in action, we need to look only at one man. Just listen to the description of Jesus' birth from the gospel of John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

History tells us that when John was writing those words, the church was battling an incorrect belief about Jesus called Docetism. Docetism comes from the Greek word, dokeo (doh-keh-oh), meaning “to seem.” Docetism is the belief that Jesus didn’t actually take on flesh and bone and become a real, live human, it just seemed that way. They argued that to do so would be too drastic of a demotion for God. After all, life as a human is messy and painful, and it can be downright difficult. Docetists claimed it was just an illusion. God’s relating to the world wasn’t that real, it wasn’t that costly, it just seemed to be.

Filled with God’s Holy Spirit, Jesus’ beloved disciple John fires back, “No, I walked with Jesus, I talked with Jesus, I was scolded by Jesus, I hugged Him, broke bread with Him, witnessed His pain and struggle. Witnessed Him weep in the Garden of Gethsemane. God sent His Son into the real world to save real people, “the Word became flesh” and he died on the cross for you. That’s how real God’s love is!

Even after all the celebrating, all the parties, all the presents, some of us may still be looking at relationships that need healing – perhaps with a parent, or a child, an ex-spouse, someone that has hurt us very much, maybe a former employer or employee, a neighbor, the list is almost endless. And we often find ourselves saying things like, “well I don’t really have the time,” or “you know what, to enter into that world at this point, this could get pretty messy.” And the truth is, you are probably right. But that didn’t stop God that first Christmas when He sent His Son, Jesus, and it shouldn’t stop us at this one.

As Alex pointed out last Sunday, Jesus’ birth wasn’t as glamorous as we portray it to be. He didn’t come to a world that was clean and where everyone had it all figured out. He came in a messy stable, to people who didn’t have it all figured out, yet were willing to put their trust in Him. He came to a people who were willing, like Mary to say, “Lord, whatever it may be, may your will be done.” He came into a messy and broken world, to people who were messy, broken and sinful.

He came into a world where He knew most would reject Him, even many who were closest to Him. He came as a baby in a manger knowing that one day He would be beaten, whipped, flogged, and hung on a cross. His body broken, His blood poured out. He came to die. I am not really sure which would be more difficult, being the one who came to earth to do it, or being the Father who sent His Son, knowing he was going to do it.

The Gift that God has given us has come at a great cost. We humans like to categorize things, separate events. We men are especially good at that! But when it comes to believing in Jesus Christ we can’t do that. Yes, Jesus is the baby in the manger, born to the virgin Mary, in the little Town of Bethlehem, to a father from the line of David. Jesus also is the great teacher who lived a sinless life and showed us and taught us how to live. Jesus is also the one who gave his life, “as a ransom for many,” his blood poured out and body hung on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is also the one who rose from the dead three days later and offers the gift of salvation for all who believe. Anytime we try and lessen the importance of any one of those events, we lose some sense of what it all means.

Christmas means absolutely nothing without the cross on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. In the same way, Good Friday and Easter Sunday don't mean anything without God taking on human flesh in Christ Jesus:

*Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*  
Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

So, we know the cost to God for that first Christmas. And the big question for us is what is the cost to us? What does God expect from us in return for what He has given us? And the answer? Usually I am much better with the questions than the answers. But this morning you will be happy to know I have the answer. However, you might not be happy with the answer. What does God expect in return for the gift that He has given us? The same thing He expected of His Son. He expects it all.

Luke tells us *The Cost of Being a Disciple*:

*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them he said:  
“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

*“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? . . . You need to count the cost. . . In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”*  
Luke 14:25-33 (NIV)

You see, we really have come full circle. Last Sunday we came forward to give our *Harvest Offering*, symbolic of us giving it all back. And give you did! Praise God! This morning we come forward to receive the gift that God has given us. Symbolic that He has given it all for us. Some have asked, is it appropriate to celebrate communion on Christmas? A good question! I would say, that unless we want to separate Jesus' birth from his death and the resurrection, then it would be inappropriate not to celebrate it.

The apostle Paul tells us that we do not have to ascend into heaven or descend into the depths to find Christ, but that He is present right here and now. He is present in the Word that is preached (Romans 10:6-8). When we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-11). And he tells us that it is in the Supper where we participate in Christ's body and blood (1 Corinthians 10:16). What seems to be three simple things, pretty clear in the Lord's mandate, but foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1). If we view those things as obligations, things that we have to do, or we just participate in them matter

of factly, then they lose their power. But if we view them as means of grace that God has initiated, then they have the power to change.

By all accounts the early church celebrated communion every time they gathered to worship. When Paul wrote his first letter to the early Christians in Corinth, he was not criticizing how often they celebrated the Lord's Supper, he was criticizing the way in which they celebrated it.

*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?*

1 Corinthians 10:16 (NIV)

The question for us this morning as we celebrate Christmas, is not so much do we really believe that God came to earth in the form of a human being, as a baby in the manger in the Town of Bethlehem, as Emmanuel - "God with Us," some 2,000 years ago? The question for us today is do we really believe that God is with us today in the resurrected Christ when we partake in the elements. It may seem as strange to us today as it did his original hearers when Jesus announces, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:53-54).

Just as Jesus in person was God's gift to those in the early first century, the Lord's Supper is God's gift to us today. And precisely because the Supper is God's gift to us rather than our gift to God, we should come filled with thanksgiving, the meaning of the word "Eucharist." Precisely because we have truly been given the richest treasure on heaven and on earth, we come forward with deep gratitude. It is one event which connects us on a regular basis with Christ, both in his dying, and most importantly, His resurrection to new life.

Yes, Paul does tell us not to participate in an unworthy manner, and he does tell us that before we come we should be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in Christ, reminding us that we cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationship with others, but ultimately communion isn't about us. It is about the acknowledgement of what God has already done for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and his resurrection. It is about giving thanks back to Him for the greatest gift that anyone could ever give us, and it is about uniting ourselves with Christ.

We have passed from Advent into Christmas - from a period of waiting for Christ's arrival to celebrating his coming. During this time we celebrate one of the great mysteries of our faith - the incarnation - "God with us." The mystery of humanity and divinity becoming one. The early church theologians stressed that the incarnation should not be seen as just the condescension of God to man, but also as the lifting up of humanity into the divine life. The Nativity story ennoble the lowest aspects of everyday life: being born in a stable, with animals and shepherds as his first visitors, and in it lies the power of the Incarnation; the humblest of things being exalted.

For the rest of the world, the Christmas season is over at the end of Christmas Day and there is nothing left to do but dig out, clean up, make post-season exchanges and returns, and figure out how to pay off the financial cost. For Christians, the celebration is just beginning. God with us! In the flesh! It should elevate every aspect of our human existence. This is the best thing that has ever happened to us. It is the gift that keeps on giving. Thanks be to God! Let us Pray,

*Thank you, God,  
for giving yourself to the world  
not in the powerful and extraordinary,  
but in the weakness and the familiar;  
in a baby: in the bread and juice.*

*Thank you,  
for offering, at one journey's end, a new beginning;  
for setting, in the poverty of a stable,  
the richest jewel of your love;  
for revealing, in a particular place,  
your light for all nations.*

*Thank you,  
for bringing us to Bethlehem, the House of Bread,  
where the empty are filled,  
and the filled are emptied;  
where the poor find riches,  
and the rich recognize their poverty;  
where all who come and hold out their hands are abundantly fed.*

Kate Compston, *Bread for Tomorrow*