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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Christmas Eve/Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14 (15-20), Psalm 96

“Falling in love with God”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

Six years ago, five of us trekked back and forth to Nashville on many Tuesdays for training to be catechists in Level One of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd—and to begin our Montessori-based Spiritual Formation program for children. (Several others have made the journey since then!) For each and every lesson that was presented to us, we developed what is called an Album Page containing information about the particular lesson and especially focusing on the purpose of teaching the lesson to young children. Why do we do what we do? Why is each particular lesson chosen? In each list of purposes—or aims or goals—we were prompted to include the statement—“To help the child fall more deeply in love with God.” The developers and trainers knew that we would need to remind ourselves that one of the goals basic for every lesson always is, “To help the child fall more deeply in love with God.”

I’m thinking that goal may be the best reason of all for us to be here today—on this Christmas Eve—“to help the child fall more deeply in love with God.” I’m not just talking about any among us who are under six—or under eighteen. Even if we are post-60 or post-90, we all have a child inside—an Inner Child who needs to fall more deeply in love with God. Our opening hymn sets the agenda—“O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.” We are here to adore the God that we believe we can know most fully in Jesus Christ—beginning at Bethlehem.

Hebrew scholars tell us that there are 613 commandments that comprise the code of Jewish law. That's a lot of commandments to even begin to remember, much less attempt to follow. Jesus makes the challenge simpler, but maybe not easier. The gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus is put to the test by a legal expert when he asks Jesus which law is most important—and that Jesus' immediate response is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." The words are simple, yes. But, what do they mean?

Some of you may have heard of the late Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar who wrote quite a few books, mostly about the historical Jesus. Simply put, the question he addresses is, "What are the facts about Jesus? Who is this person named Jesus—the one who is absolutely central to our Christian faith?" In his lifetime, Marcus Borg was considered to be a "heretic" in some very conservative circles of Christians. So, with that judgment made of him, it surely comes as no surprise that Borg would tell us that we can't know a whole lot if we want to depend on absolute facts about Jesus' life. There are no reporters embedded with the troops that night in Bethlehem—there are no satellites circling the earth and taking pictures—even Luke, the writer, isn't there and probably doesn't write tonight's story until around eighty years later—and no other gospel writer that we know of tells this same story. No one else tells about the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem; no one else tells about no-room-in-the-inn; no one else tells about the band of heavenly hosts singing; no one else tells about the shepherds coming to worship the baby. It's not a story based on fact. But, is it true? Absolutely.

The Christmas story is a story based on deep truth. I know that—and I hope you know that—and Marcus Borg knew that, too. In one of his last books entitled Convictions: How I

Learned What Matters Most, which is a combination of memoir and academic writing, he ends with a chapter focusing on what it means to love God. Jesus tells us that loving God is the greatest commandment, but, honestly, most of us don't think about it very much. Maybe we were raised with the idea that God is primarily to be obeyed or feared—rather than loved—that God is concerned with judgment and condemnation, even coercion—rather than with drawing us into relationship and being united with us. It seems like a big enough challenge to accept how much God loves us. So, what's the big deal about how much we love God? I often don't think I know the answers to many of life's ultimate questions, but I do think I know the answer to this one. Knowing how much we are loved heals us—falling in love transforms us. Falling in love with God is our salvation—falling in love with God reorients our lives and our understandings of who we are and what God intends for our values and priorities to be. As we spend more time “hanging out” with the one we love, we find ourselves looking at others and at the world with new eyes—with God's eyes—we find ourselves loving the world with God's love. Our concerns shift. When we are centered on God—our ultimate lover—we find ourselves loving what God loves—loving the least of these—those who suffer most from poverty and powerlessness and victimization—we find ourselves caring more deeply about Mother Earth and all of God's creation.

Making that shift away from self and onto love of God and what God loves is not easy. Often it happens after we have tried many other paths first and found them lacking, and we are in good company. St. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century philosopher and theologian, dedicated his life to academia and writing until one day he had a revelation from God and gave it all up, saying, “All that I have written appears to be straw compared to what has been revealed to me.” St.

Augustine, the fourth century bishop of Hippo in northern Africa and one of the most influential theologians in Christian history, wrote extensively and shares his relationship and conversation with God in his book entitled Confessions. In a well-known passage, Augustine writes:

*How late I came to love you, O Beauty so ancient and so fresh, how late I came to love you. You were within me, yet I had gone outside to seek you. Unlovely myself, I rushed toward all those lovely things you had made. And always you were with me, I was not with you. All these beauties kept me far from you—although they would not have existed at all unless they had their being in you. You called, you cried, you shattered my deafness. You sparkled, you blazed, you drove away my blindness. You shed your fragrance, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you, I tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with longing.*

(10.27)

How are we to come to know and to love this God that Augustine came to know and love—the one who called and cried and sparkled and blazed, wooing him into relationship—turning him around and filling him with peace and joy?

Luke must have been one of the smartest and most creative people who ever lived. Scholars tell us that, when he was writing, he was attempting to make this little Jewish family seem as “safe” as possible. He is telling a story about people who would not be a threat at all to the Roman authorities—good law-abiding citizens—the most humble of people, their child being placed in a feeding trough rather than a cradle—the most marginal of people with no thought of acquiring power and wealth, visited by poor shepherds instead of rich Wise Men. But, I think he may have had an additional agenda in creating this scenario. He must have known that babies

are irresistible to us. Just think about the big window in the hallway at the hospital—all the little bassinets lined up—all the visitors craning their necks for a good view—all the nurses holding up the newborns, showing them off. We are immediately hooked—we are ga-ga—even if we don't know who the babies are. What a trickster Luke is! He wants us to fall in love with this baby in the manger. This is where the love affair starts.

Let us hope this Christmas that the irresistible babe in the manger will draw us more and more deeply into loving God with all that we are—heart, soul, and mind—that we may be transformed by that love—and that we may live our lives from that sacred center, loving what God loves.

May God bless us and keep us.

May God's face shine upon us and give us grace.

Grace not to sell ourselves short.

Grace to risk something big for something good.

Grace enough to remember that the world is now too  
dangerous for anything but TRUTH

and too small for anything but LOVE

May God take our minds and  
THINK THROUGH THEM

May God take our lips and  
SPEAK THROUGH THEM

May God take our hands and  
WORK THROUGH THEM

May God take our hearts and  
SET THEM ON FIRE.

Amen.