

## WHAT DOES LOVE LOOK LIKE?

Luke 2:1-20

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Here is what I deeply believe. The stories we tell and the stories we focus on shape our lives. They shape reality.

Here's an example. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there were two narratives. One was the story of looting, chaos, people behaving at their worst, people shooting at rescue helicopters. The other narrative tells of people at their best, tremendous altruism, people risking their lives on rowboats, navigating dangerous passages trying to save as many of their fellow citizens as possible, over 200,000 people inviting displaced strangers into their homes.

If you focused only on the first story, you would be afraid to help, afraid to engage, to get involved. Some helicopter rescues stopped because of the rumor that helicopters were being shot at, a rumor which turned out to be false.

If you turned your attention to the story after story of neighborliness, you would probably be inclined to volunteer, if not opening your own home then at least providing meals, donating clothing, giving of your time and money.

Stories make all the difference.

One of the most challenging aspects of my life and of my work, at this moment in time, is balancing the stories. I am not a Pollyanna. I do not want a sugar-coated version of reality. I want to know the truth about what's going on in the world. I can't become engaged

or even pray if I'm unaware. So I read and I listen to the news. And I think about terrorism and gun violence and refugees and homelessness and the plight of our beloved planet.

But part of the truth, part of the reality, is that wonderfully good and amazing loving actions are also taking place.

And those stories are the ones that motivate me to action and keep my hope alive.

The story of Christmas is a story of love. It is not just soft, mushy, Hallmark Christmas movie kind of love. But love that is practical, muscular, and public. Love that takes risks, love that goes into dangerous places, love that is vulnerable.

The story of Christmas is the story of God choosing to become a human being, to get as close to us as possible, because God loves us that much. When we get close to one another, we will experience love but also hurt. Everyone in this room knows that. We can't get close to people without experiencing hurt. The story of Christmas is the story of a God who loves us so much that God chooses to become a human being. God gets so close to us that God ends up getting hurt.

God is with us. That is the name of the child in the manger. Emmanuel. It means God is with us. In every circumstance of our lives. There is nothing we experience that God does not understand.

David Gilkey was an award-winning photographer who traveled the world to tell the stories in pictures stories that people needed to know. He covered the earthquake in Haiti and the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. He spent time with Syrian refugees in Toledo, and captured the stories of schoolchildren in Kabul. He felt especially close to U.S. servicemen and women, taking every opportunity to highlight the sacrifices they made in the face of grave danger. He didn't see himself just as a photographer; he always had a greater purpose in his mind, asking himself, with every single assignment, 'Do those visuals, do the stories, do they change somebody's mind enough to take action?' Gilkey was a photographer who refused to

use a zoom lens. He said, "I have to get close enough to people to feel what they are feeling...with a zoom lens I can keep my distance, but I don't want to keep my distance."

David Gilkey was killed on the job in Afghanistan, doing the work of love, telling the stories that needed to be told, so that love can thrive. David Gilkey knew that the only way to live is to get close. Even if it hurts.

Love looks like a photographer who refuses to use a zoom lens because he wants to get closer to the people whose stories he values.

Love takes risks. Love takes chances. Love doesn't always play it safe. I see love when I think of the stories of so many people in this church. Love is the person who chooses not to take the more lucrative job, staying instead in a job that has the possibility to transform more lives. Love looks like the schoolteacher in a low-income district, the social worker in a non-profit organization in the city. Love is the family that adopts special needs children. Love is giving a kidney to someone you barely know, love is taking a meal to a neighbor not just once but week after week.

Under the leadership of our church member and UCC president John Dorhauer, the United Church of Christ launched an initiative recently called Three Great Loves, encouraging churches to engage in projects showing forth a love of neighbor, a love of children, and a love of creation. That project is inspiring the church to embody the love of a God who gets close.

Our congregation's most recent mission partner is Primary Purpose, an organization working hands-on with men and women who are recovering from opioid addiction. Half of our Christmas offering is going directly to Primary Purpose, and we provided pies for their Christmas dinner, and we've helped them in many other ways this fall. We know how difficult it is to overcome addiction and we want to let those in recovery know that they are not alone. So as Christmas approached, we felt good about our support for this organization, and we wrapped up all our mission projects for the year and turned our attention to our own family

celebrations. And then, on Wednesday of last week, we received a call. One of the guys at Primary Purpose relapsed and died of an overdose, leaving behind a wife and three children, ages 8, 9 and 10. The family had no money and nothing for Christmas. Our Mission Team leapt back into action, provided gifts for the children and food for Christmas dinner. And that's what love looks like.

If you ever wonder what the purpose of the church is, if it's really important in your life or in our world today, know this. Here at this church, we are telling the story of what love is doing in the world. We are telling it, like David Gilkey did with his camera, so that we will all be inspired to take action. We are telling the story of love, we are telling it without a zoom lens, we are getting close to one another, because we worship a God who gets close to us.

If there are no stories of hope, how can we stay motivated to make a difference? It is these stories of love which shape us and form our character. These stories of love and hope tell us who we are and what our values are.

What does love look like? It was Christmas Eve in 1967. William Weaver\*, 18 at the time, was walking in Mechanicsville, the neighborhood he grew up in in Knoxville, Tenn., when he saw a boy gliding down the street on a bicycle.

"Boy, that looks like my brother's bike," he mused.

When he got home, he asked his younger brother Wayne where that bicycle was. "It's down on the steps," he replied. But it wasn't.

The Weaver brothers tracked down the boy who stole the bike. They found where he lived — an unlit shack in an alley — and planned to confront him.

"Now, my brother and I, we were going to beat up this boy, but my father was with us and he said, 'Just shut up and let me talk,' " William says.

An elderly man with a cane answered their knock on the door. The home appeared cold and dark, and he had a single candle for light. His grandson, William learned, was the boy who had stolen the bike.

"He was the same age as my brother, about 10 years old," William says. "The little boy starts crying and he says, 'I just wanted something for Christmas.' "

They took the bike and walked home.

"My father tells my mother and she doesn't say anything," William remembers. "She just starts cutting the turkey in half and all the fixings. She started packing it up. My father went to the coal yard and got a big bag of coal. And then he told my brother, he said, 'You've got another bike, don't you?' My brother said 'Yeah.' "

And the three returned to the shack in the alley, this time with food, some coal to provide heat and the bike.

"The little boy is just crying, but the thing that moved me the most was the old man. My father gave him \$20, which was a huge deal back then for us, and said, 'Merry Christmas.' "

The man said thank you and broke down in tears, William says.

"My father was a chauffeur, my mother was a domestic, so we didn't have a lot of stuff. And that Christmas, I don't even remember what gift I got, but I do know that made me feel better than any Christmas I've ever had."

That's what love looks like. And that's a story that has shaped a life.

This Christmas, celebrate the God who gets close, and the love that risks hurt, and the story that motivates us all.

\*William Weaver story told on StoryCorps: <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/15/570806606/on-christmas-eve-a-stolen-bicycle-and-a-lesson-in-giving>