

“The Extravagance of Love” – Christmas 2009

In the United States, and other countries around the world, people are familiar with the Christmas Story of Jesus' birth. I wish to share some thoughts and comments to reflect on Christmas. Most people, I believe, agree that the main theme for this event is God's love for the whole world. We celebrate that Jesus was born to become the Christ and came to proclaim, in word and deed, God's love for everyone in all times and in all places for the whole of creation.

LOVE – Limitless Offerings Veraciously Expended

Since the beginning, there are innumerable ways in which we have received limitless offerings. Unfortunately expressions of love have not always come from people or in some places where we expected. Sadly, history informs us of too many such occasions wherein hate and violence erupted instead of love, support, and encouragement. In his song, “Imagine”, John Lennon points out this dilemma in a poetic way.

*Imagine there's no heaven It's easy if you try
No hell below us Above us only sky
Imagine all the people Living for today...*

*Imagine there's no countries It isn't hard to do Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too Imagine all the people Living life in peace...*

*Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people Sharing all the world...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us And the world will live as one*

[<http://johnlennon.lyrics.info/imagine.html>]

We need to begin to realize how some things that we deem valuable and important to our lives have become sources of our problems. We tend to think that heaven and hell are either not real or in the future later on. Many people today are experiencing hell every day while a few have made a heavenly life for themselves. In this twenty-first century we should realize that heaven and hell are very real concepts that affect us now as well as our future. The corruption of so many countries, even our own, have become organized seedbeds of war and violence both physically and socially. Even much of our religion has caused a lot of our wars and conflicts over the centuries reaching out for power, control and authority rather than being centers for healing and compassion. With our quest for possessions and wealth we have little consideration for caring and sharing.

This poignant critique of how the world may be one is further embellished by another song that Lennon and McCartney wrote together. The Beatles played this for the first time on the "Our World" project, the first worldwide TV special. Broadcast in 24 countries on June 25, 1967, the show was 6 hours long and featured music from 6 continents, with The Beatles representing Britain. The concept of the song was born out of a request to bring a song that was going to be understood by people of all nations. The writing began in late May of 1967, with John and Paul working on separate songs. It was decided that John's "All You Need Is Love" was the better choice because of it's easy to understand

message of love and peace. The song was easy to play, the words easy to remember and it encompassed the feeling of the world's youth during that period. If you wish to hear it you may follow this link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLEtGRUrtJo&feature=youtube_gdata_player]

The Beatles - Lennon/McCartney

*Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love. There's nothing you can do that can't be done.
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung. Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the
game. It's easy. There's nothing you can make that can't be made.*

No one you can save that can't be saved.

Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time - It's easy.

All you need is love, all you need is love, All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

*Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love. All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need. There's nothing you can know that isn't known.*

Nothing you can see that isn't shown.

Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be. It's easy.

All you need is love, all you need is love, All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

All you need is love (all together now) All you need is love (everybody)

All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

Religious and non-religious people alike seem to talk about love and losing our affections for material things that more often diminish our humanity especially in these famine economic times. We have too many organizations that do more to drive us apart than help us live together. The lack for true love and respect for one another is sadly missing in places that talk about love and claim they love everyone while judging and turning away from those who think and act differently. This seems to me to be rather hypocritical when they claim to be speaking for God. I remember my mother, a vocal soloist, who sang this hymn in many places of worship, "The Love of God".

1. The love of God is greater far, than tongue or pen can ever tell.

It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.

The guilty pari, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;

His erring child He reconciled and pardoned from his sin.

Chorus:

O Love of God, how rich and pure!

How measureless and strong!

It shall forevermore endure

The saints' and angels' song

3. Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made;

Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade;

To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry;

Nor could the scroll contain the whole though stretched from sky to sky

[The author & story of this hymn - http://www.tanbible.com/tol_sng/theloveofgod.htm]

Many who listened and love this hymn were not able to allow its message to reach them or others. It seemed too difficult to allow God's love to actually be "rich and pure", "measureless and strong", forevermore enduring for everyone, everywhere, in all times and places. The words of this hymn, to me, explain the story of Christmas – a "redeeming grace to Adam's race". Does any person or organized community of persons have the authority to limit this love of God from anyone in our world to whom it has been so freely given? Should it not be our duty and privilege to extend this inclusive, uncompromising, and incomprehensive "song" by our words and deeds to all people everywhere? Indeed, love is God's gift to us for sharing with family, friend, and neighbor.

There are two stories in Scripture that I feel demonstrate why I titled this, "The Extravagance of Love". The first one is the story of Joseph that is recorded in a large part of Genesis. It tells us about a young boy who is a dreamer and rather spiritual for his age. He senses that he has a great purpose in life and enjoys reaching toward his goal of service to others. His life is so incredible that a movie was made, "Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat". If you have seen the movie or the play I do not need to compete with how well it demonstrated my point. I would invite you to read the 45th Chapter of Genesis to focus on how extravagant his love was for his family and all the people of Egypt. I share this brief portion to make my point, *"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.'*" [Genesis 45:4-5} Remember, they tried to kill him and harassed him most of his time with them. This is an example of what true love means and how overgenerous it really should be.

Another story is often called the Prodigal Son or the Lost Son [Luke 15:11-32], a parable that Jesus told to make a point about God's incomprehensible love for all people, everywhere, at all times, and in all places. The Father who has two sons; one who stays home with his father having received his inheritance and the other who sells it all and wanders far away. Finally the wanderer, having become destitute, returns home with remorse and repentance to his father who welcomes him back, gives him a ring and a fine robe and shoes (denoting his full restoration to his family) and celebrates his return with an extraordinary feast. The fact that the other brother was quite annoyed and angry by his father's actions reminds me of so many "faithful and obedient" religious folk who "never got a dinner", as Red Buttons would say. Would that everyone within the human family were always as forgiving and understanding as this loving father.

Let us not become jealous because this extravagant love of God belongs to all of us, everywhere, at all times, and in all places. *"Almost all spiritual teachers say something to this effect: 'Do not judge.'....The great teachers are saying that you cannot start seeing or understanding if you start with 'No.' You have to start with a 'Yes' of basic acceptance, which means not too quickly labeling, analyzing, or categorizing things in or out, good or bad. You have to leave the field open. The ego seems to strengthen itself by constriction, by being against, or by re-action, and it feels loss or fear when it opens up. Spiritual teachers want you to live by positive action, open field, and conscious understanding, not by resistance, knee-jerk reactions, or defensiveness. This is not easy: it often takes a lifetime of work and honest self-observation to stop judging or starting with 'no'."* ["The Naked Now – Learning to See as the Mystics See", by Richard Rohr (Crossroad Publishing Co., New York) pgs. 50-52]

Is this not, my friends, the essence of the story of Christmas? The humble yet dramatic awareness of God's love for our living together in this world; the wise and the foolish, the prominent and the poor, the people near and far, the angels above and the animals below are never separated from this love of God now and forever.

What the world needs now
Is love, sweet love
That's the only thing that
There's just too little of

[a 1965 popular song with lyrics by Hal David and music composed by Burt Bacharach]

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.