

With (even more than for)

January 5, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Portions of John 1

Largely based on [“The Most Important Word” by Sam Wells](#) – a sermon from Dec 24, 2010 at Duke Chapel

I love it that this congregation holds on to Christmas. Perhaps mostly because of the song...what is it, 12 drummers drumming?...most people know there are twelve days of Christmas, but we don't act like it. In most places the decorations are down, the playlists have changed, the ill-fitting or otherwise unwanted presents have been returned (Marshalls in Somerville was packed last Thursday!), and people are getting on with things. Twelve days isn't enough to fully plumb the spiritual depths of the incarnation of Christ, but I am glad we are at least using the full twelve days here.

At Christmas some people have songs they sing every year, or movies they go back to, or shows that just make the season for them (like “It's a Wonderful Life”). Sorry to fulfill a pastoral stereotype, but the thing I go back to every year, the thing which really makes it Christmas for me, is a sermon – a sermon I heard many years ago by the preacher at Duke Chapel, Sam Wells. Most of what follows basically comes from that sermon by Sam Wells.

The sermon started with three imaginary, but very relatable, scenes: Wells spoke of someone trying to buy a Christmas present for their father, a father with whom they were not very close, and toward whom there were certainly some resentments, disappointments, and feelings of love not shared. Buying a present for this father became a task of trying to do something for him that would bridge the gap, or at least make the gap less noticeable.

The second scene was about hosting family from out of town for Christmas, and getting so wrapped up in, or perhaps escaping into, everything you need to do for the others, the preparing, the cleaning, the cooking, all of it, that even with a few days together, you never really take the time to sit and talk, to connect.

The third scene was about feeling like there was something shallow about your cozy Christmas with family and friends, and your heart breaking when you see people on the street corner, waving meekly and holding a sign that says, “please help.” So instead of something from Target or Amazon, the only thing you put on your Christmas wish list is a request for donations to organizations helping people having a tough time in the cold, in isolation, in poverty, or in grief. It makes you feel better to do something for other people.

Again, mostly using Sam Wells's words, I ask then, what do all these scenes have in common? I want to suggest to you that they're all based on one tiny word: it's the word, “for.” When we care about those for whom Christmas is a tough time, we want to do something “for” them. When we want our houseguests to enjoy their Christmas visit, our impulse is to spend all our time doing things “for” them, whether cooking dinner or constantly clearing the house or arranging activities to keep them busy. When we feel our relationship with our father is faltering, our instinct is to do something “for” him that somehow melts his heart and makes everything all right.

And those gestures of “for” matter because they sum up a whole life in which we try to make relationships better, try to make the world better, try to be better people ourselves by doing things “for” people. We praise the selflessness of those who spend their lives doing things “for” people. It seems that the word that epitomizes being an admirable person, the word that sums up the spirit of Christmas, is “for.” We cook “for,” we buy presents “for,” we offer charity “for,” all to show that we are “for” others.

But there’s a problem here. All these gestures are generous, and kind, and in some cases sacrificial and noble. They’re good gestures, warm-hearted, admirable gestures. But somehow, they don’t get to the heart of what’s really going on. You give your father the gift, and the chasm still lies between you. You wear yourself out in showing hospitality, but you’ve never actually had good and deep conversation with your loved ones. You make fine gestures of charity, but the poor are still strangers to you. “For” is a fine word, but it doesn’t dismantle resentment, it doesn’t overcome misunderstanding, it doesn’t deal with alienation, it doesn’t overcome isolation.

Most of all, “for” isn’t the way God celebrates Christmas. God doesn’t set the world right at Christmas. God doesn’t shower us with good things at Christmas. God doesn’t pile blessings upon us and then get miffed when we open them all up and fail to be sufficiently excited or surprised or grateful. “For” isn’t what God shows us at Christmas.

In some ways we wish it was. We’d love God to make everything happy and surround us with perfect things. When we get cross with God, it’s easy to feel God isn’t keeping God’s side of the bargain – to do things “for” us now and forever.

But God shows us something else at Christmas. God speaks a rather different word. You heard it in the reading from John earlier – basically a summary of what Christmas is all about. “The Logos became flesh and pitched-a-tent with us.” In another familiar part of the Christmas story, the angel says to Joseph, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” It’s an unprepossessing little word, but this is the word that lies at the heart of Christmas and at the heart of the Christian faith. The word is “with.”

Think back to the very beginning of all things. John’s gospel says, “In the beginning (note the echo of Genesis here)...In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was *with* God...He was in the beginning *with* God. *Without* him not one thing came into being.” In other words, before anything else, there was a “with:” the “with” between God and the Logos, or as Christians came to call it, between the Father and the Son. “With” is the most fundamental thing about God.

And then think about how Jesus concludes his ministry. His very last words in Matthew’s gospel are, “Behold, I am *with* you always.” In other words, there will never be a time when I am not “with.” And at the very end of the Bible, when the book of Revelation describes the final disclosure of God’s everlasting destiny, this is what the voice from heaven says: “Behold, the home of God is *with* mortals. God will dwell *with* them as their God; they will be God’s peoples, and God’s very self will be *with* them.”

We've discovered here the most important word in the Bible – the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us. And that word is "with." That's what God was in the very beginning, that's what God sought to instill in the creation of all things, that's what God was looking for in making the covenant with Israel, that's what God coming among us in Jesus was all about, that's what the sending of the Holy Spirit meant, that's what our destiny in the company of God will look like. It's all in that little word "with." God's whole life and action and purpose are shaped to be "with" us.

In a lot of ways, "with" is harder than "for." You can do "for" without a conversation, without a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of your life to accommodate and incorporate the other. The reason your Christmas present for your father is doomed is not because "for" is wrong, not because there's anything bad about generosity; it's because the only solution is for you and your father to be "with" each other long enough to hear each other's stories and tease out the countless misunderstandings and hurts that have taken your relationship beyond the point of being rescued by the right Christmas present. The reason why you collapse in tears when your guests have gone home is because the hard work is finding out how you can share the different responsibilities and genuinely be "with" one another in the kitchen and elsewhere that make a stay of a few nights a joy of "with" rather than a burden of "for." What makes attempts at Christmas charity seem a little hollow is not that they're not genuine and helpful and kind but that what isolated and grieving and impoverished people usually need is not gifts or money but the faithful presence "with" them of someone who really cares about them as a person. It's the "with" they desperately want, and the "for" on its own (whether it's food, presents or money) can't make up for the lack of that "with."

But we all fear the "with," because the "with" seems to ask more of us than we can give. We'd all prefer to keep charity on the level of "for," where it can't hurt us. We all know that more families struggle over Christmas than any other time. Maybe that's because you can spend the whole year being busy and doing things "for" your family, but when there's nothing else to do but be "with" one another you realize that being "with" is harder than doing "for" – and sometimes it's just too hard. Sometimes New Year comes as a relief as we can go back to doing "for" and leave aside being "with" for another year.

And that's why it's glorious, almost incredible, good news that God didn't settle on "for." At Christmas God said unambiguously, "I am 'with'." Behold, I've pitched a tent with you. I've moved into the neighborhood. I will be "with" you always. My name is Emmanuel, God "with" us.

Sure, there was an element of "for" in Jesus' life. He was "for" us when he healed and taught, he was "for" us when he died on the cross, he was "for" us when he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven. These are things that only God can do and we can't do. But the power of these things God did "for" us lies in that they were based on his being "with" us. God has not abolished "for." But God, this night, in becoming flesh in Jesus, has said there will never again be a "for" that's not based on a fundamental, unalterable, everlasting, and utterly unswerving "with." That's the good news of Christmas.

And how do we celebrate this good news? By being "with" people in poverty and distress even when there's nothing we can do "for" them. By being "with" people in grief and sadness and loss even when there's nothing to say. By being "with" and listening to and walking with those we find most difficult rather than trying to fob them off with a gift or a face-

saving gesture. By being still “with” God in silent prayer rather than rushing in our anxiety to do yet more things “for” God. By taking an appraisal of all our relationships and asking ourselves, “Does my doing *for* arise out of a fundamental commitment to be *with*, or is my doing *for* driven by my profound desire to avoid the discomfort, the challenge, the patience, the loss of control involved in being *with*?”

No one could be more tempted to retreat into doing “for” than God. God, above all, knows how exasperating, ungrateful, thoughtless and self-destructive company we can be. Most of the time we just want God to fix it, and spare us the relationship. But that’s not God’s way. God could have done it all alone, without involving us. But God loves us too much for that. God chose to do it *with* us. Even though it led to the cross. That’s the wonder of Christmas.

That’s the amazing truth of the word “with.”

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

