

**Sermon Christmas Eve 2021**  
**Is God's Love Still Contagious? – Rev. Markus Wegenast**

1) So I was checking my email on my phone when I dropped off my boys in school the other day. A subject line caught my attention: “Four essentials of a great Christmas Eve Service.” The email came from a noted church research personality so I immediately checked it. The first three pieces of advice were common sense and I was glad that we had already put them in place, but then there was essential number four:

*“Be more positive and less prophetic in your sermon.  
Christmas Eve is not a good time to call out the woes of culture.”*

Oops, I'm in trouble tonight!

Here is my opening question for you that I had already lined up when I read the email. Are you ready? Don't say I didn't give you a fair warning:

**Do you believe America is headed for another civil war?!**

Pfff, I'm really ruining the mood right now, don't I? Why, why could I not get that email two days sooner?! But friends, I mean it – I'm not asking a rhetorical question.

When Jesus was born, God made the most generous gift: He gave himself to this world, helpless and triumphant at the same time. God loves you so very much he gives himself to you for your salvation. Through Christ's salvation we are freed from selfishness and contempt for others, we are redeemed to love as generously as God does. God's love is meant to be contagious, he wants the whole world to be affected/infected by it – but we seem to build up more and more layers of immunity!

The year is 2021, we are a little over 2000 years removed from the birth of Jesus when heaven announced peace on earth. You and I, we live in a culture in which God's love for our neighbor is getting swallowed up by a culture of contempt. The forces of polarization are pulling us apart.

In 2014 academics from Northwestern University, Boston College, and the University of Melbourne finished a prestigious research project. It was about (ready for big words?): **“Motive attribution asymmetry”** (Arthur Brooks, Love Your Enemies, p. 21)

My slides are not getting any more attractive tonight, do they? What MAA stands for is the phenomenon when people believe that their convictions and ideologies are rooted in love, while people with opposing convictions are rooted in hatred.

**= Believing that your ideology is based in love while your opponent's is based in hatred.**

In their study they found that many voters in our culture suffer from a level of MAA that is comparable to that of Palestinians and Israelis.

That was 7 years ago – do you feel it's gotten better since? (Now that is a rhetorical question, isn't it?) You and I we live in a culture in which many of us think that we are on the right and loving side, while the other side is motivated by hate.

If this is true, how are we ever going to be able to live in peace with each other? How are we ever going to love as God loved us in Jesus?

This is Christmas Eve – a time when we want to take a break from the dividedness we experience in our society and lives. There is enough troubling news out there about what the pandemic will do within the next couple of weeks, do we really need to discuss our culture of contempt tonight – don't we need a break from that?

Yes, yes we do. The message of Christ's birth is about taking a break from our dividedness and contempt – but not just for the holidays so we can have a peaceful family gatherings.

**God wants us to take a break from our culture of contempt for good**

God's expectations are much bigger: He sent his son so we'd take a break from our dividedness for good – not just for the Christmas family gathering! **How?**

2) About 30 years after Jesus was born he told us how to do peace on earth and peace with our difficult neighbor. He shared it in one of his most challenging speeches he ever gave, the Sermon on the Mount. In it he said something outrageous, but in this outrageous statement he gave us the most powerful instruction for peace. Three words:

**Love. Your. Enemies.**

That's the divine answer for making peace a reality. Love. Your. Enemies. It's not a smart philosophical challenge that Jesus preached, it's something that he lived day in and day out. He lived it to the end, even when his enemies crucified him. Instead of calling heavenly legions against them, he would let his enemies do their hateful thing because he trusted that God would bring forth something good from his death: Reconciliation offered to his enemies and to everyone who would hear it.

You know, Jesus' time was pretty polarized too. In fact, his society may have been even more polarized than ours. They had a pandemic of hatred going on and the time was ripe for a revolution. Into this situation God sent his son, not as a revolutionizer but as someone who said: Love your enemies.

If you're interested in peace and don't want to put up with a culture of contempt anymore, do that: love your enemy. This is a message of the one born in the stable. It has nothing to do with partisan politics, military budgets, or secular movements of pacifism – this is a message that has everything to do with your personal attitude, faith, and love.

You know, I don't think that the problem of our culture is that we see each other as enemies. If (e.g.) you are a person rooted in conservative ideals and notions, why wouldn't you see a neighbor who is rooted in liberal ideals as an enemy? If you are convinced that getting vaccinated against Covid is the best way to keep everyone safe, why wouldn't you see someone who is against vaccination as an ideological enemy?

**Seeing someone as an enemy is not the problem! The problem is when we don't love our enemy.**

I am pretty doubtful that our society will be able to agree on controversial issues – that shouldn't even be the goal. The goal should be that we love those we disagree with, that we love those we believe are harmful to our nation and society.

If you love those you feel are on the completely wrong side of history. Your hatred and contempt will not win anyone over – never! Only your/God's love can win someone over, and only your love can convince *you* that you may be the one who's got it wrong – but that's another story.

3) The story for today is the manger where Christ was born. Christ lived out God's generous love. He never compromised his truth, **loving your enemy does not mean you have to agree** with him or her. Christ didn't, but he would not let it keep him from loving his enemies because that was the greater truth. That's the Christ we are invited to follow. That's the Christ who wants to convert your heart. I believe if we do this we make God's love contagious again...

*There once was a monk who found a very precious gemstone. He put it in his knapsack and carried it with him. One day he met a traveler in need who asked the monk to share some of his provisions with him. The monk opened his knapsack to share his food, when his fingers found the gem. So he lifted out the stone and gave it to the traveler in need. The traveler went on his way, overjoyed about the monk's surprising and generous gift.*

*A few days later, however, the traveler caught up with the monk. He begged him again: "Please, give me something more precious than this stone," he said. "Please give me that which prompted you to give the stone to me." – Homiletics April 2005, Acts 2:14ff*

Do you believe that God's love is still contagious? There is only one way to find out: live it. Live out God's love that came to us at Christmas. Live out the most outrageously generous love that would even love one's enemy. It will be your best attempt to escape our culture of contempt.

For this you need Christ in your heart. Ask Jesus to come into your heart so that you can give your most precious love to others – even your enemies. Maybe they will take advantage of your kindheartedness, but maybe they will be intrigued. Maybe there's a chance that your love is contagious and that they come back to you like the stranger in the story. Perhaps they'll turn around because they're curious about that which prompted you to give them your precious love.

May it be so. Amen.