

# Rhem Family Christmas Service

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It may surprise you how much I think about this time together and how much I treasure these moments. Not the grandchildren so much but you, our children, I think have some sense of the way I have traveled, the distance I have come from the loving embrace of my beloved parents. I suspect they would be concerned about where I am in my faith journey. They were sincere, devout, faithful in faith and lip expression. I think of them – such truly good people.

And, of course, coming along when I did, it was like growing up with four mothers – Esther, 13 years, Jo, 11 years, Lois, 9 years older than me. So I grew up in an adult household where there was a uniform faith and practice and in my mind and heart it was embraced without question. I was an “old soul” young man. And I fulfilled my father’s prayer – he gave me to the service of God.

I have traveled a million miles from the faith understanding that was imprinted on my soul, the understanding I embraced as an adolescent, that I totally believed as I matriculated through college and seminary. My ministry began in Spring Lake and I was as conservative in my faith understanding as the day I made profession of my faith in Third Reformed, Kalamazoo, after a summer camp experience at Camp Geneva after my 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduation. From childhood to seminary graduation to ordination, I was a true believer in orthodox Reformed faith. The Christian faith in which I was nurtured, the faith with which I emerged from seminary, the faith I preached I truly believed was “the way, the truth, and the life” and outside of Jesus’ death and resurrection there was no salvation – and this was an eternal matter!

I have written about the early Spring Lake years – the beginning of questions and wondering – the move to New Jersey where the questions only grew larger and, finally, the move to the Netherlands – Leiden, Professor Berkhof – four years of in-depth study, wondering, evolving – the return to Spring Lake and the need to bring to expression that with which I had been engaged.

It was my life situation that sparked the eruption of the congregation – from First Reformed to Christ Community – that deserves a chapter of its own. But let me skip to 1984, Palm Sunday – the sermon “Jesus, You are Really Somebody!” In that sermon I made the bold claim that “Jesus died *because* of our sin, not *for* our sins.”

That was a watershed for me – a move away from atonement theology – Jesus paying the penalty for our sins/ we cleansed by Jesus' blood as we confessed him Savior and Lord. The exclusivist theology claimed that through Jesus' death alone could one be saved eternally. Apart from faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, there was no salvation.

That Palm Sunday, 1984, I moved away from absolutist, exclusive religion and opened the gate to a new understanding of God, of grace and salvation – and saw Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life – and all serious and sincere religious faith and practice as true and good – to be judged by the fruit found in the lives of those who practice a given religious way.

We miss our faith community – the people, the gatherings, the music, the rituals, the celebration of the Seasons. All of that shapes and forms and creates life-shaping practice. It puts one in the milieu of the Sacred Mystery, the creative Source of all, the Love that is the Ground of Being, however imaged.

For you, children, grandchildren, it is my hope, my prayer that you will find your way to a fundamental trust, a place to rest and hope and find joy and peace.

I marvel at how far I have traveled from my childhood religious faith understanding and practice. But one thing has remained with me from my childhood and youth –  
its seriousness,  
its authenticity.

That remains with me, and however you, my children and grandchildren, find and express a place to be, a place that gives hope and peace and calls you to the good life, I hope it will be serious, authentic and life-giving.

Finally, the Way of Jesus is the way of love. Live in love and all will be well.

Christmas Prayer with Family  
12-25-2014

Eternal One, Sacred Mystery,  
in whom we live and move and have our being –  
we are gathered as family.  
Natural ties bind us but the love expands  
to those with whom we fall in love and share our lives.  
So here we are – a family core and those added in love,  
and somehow those additions meld into one so we are family –  
not in-laws as it were, but just one human grouping,  
a family bound by ties of love.  
Here we are – different in so many ways,  
yet bonded in the magic bond of love.

What a mystery, what a wonder –  
How wonderful!

Ah, dear God,  
we celebrate that millennia-old story of one who came  
and so impacted his day, his age and ages to follow  
that we gather to celebrate his birth  
and again at Christmas, pledge to be like him,  
to follow in his steps.  
Easier said than done –  
He forgave those who crucified him –  
He acknowledged a sense of being forsaken.  
Finally, he entrusted himself to you, O God.  
Yet we know it is true – He was true –  
non-violent resistance is the only weapon of love.  
Violence begets violence; hate begets hate; war begets war;  
love begets love, the world's only hope.

Eternal God, Sacred Mystery, Creative Source of all that is, of our lives,  
we would follow him, be like him,  
for we believe it is not only the one hope for the world  
but it is to live life at its fullest and best:  
to be true, to be good, to live with compassion,  
finally, to love not just the lovable, but so to love  
that it changes, transforms  
those whose lives have never been touched with love.

O God, that is the miracle, the mystery,  
our only hope – to love.  
So easy here in family, easy for those like us,  
but then the others, the strangers, those so differently shaped...  
Knowing as we do deep down that love transforms  
both the lover and the one loved.  
Love heals, binds, makes one – only love,  
a grace we possess in fits and starts,  
a love that itself must come from You, Oh loving God,  
whose face we have glimpsed in the face of Jesus.

Thus we worship today;  
we remember his birth and Your gift  
– a way to live, the Way of Jesus,  
the way of love....  
Amen.