



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: December 24, 2009

See What Love God Has for Us, Robert B. Culp

1 John 3:1

In his wonderful collection of church stories, *The Good News from North Haven*, Michael Lindvall, who is the senior pastor at The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, writes about the fictitious little town of North Haven, Minnesota, and its small, but vibrant church.

Following a baptism service on Thanksgiving weekend, as the pastor was picking up stray bulletins from the pews in putting the sanctuary in order, he noticed one person was in the back, waiting awkwardly for him. He said that she was dressed in “Salvation Army style, clutching a black plastic purse.” He recognized her as someone who always sat in the back pew, off to the side, closest to the back door. She seemed to fumble for words, as she commented how nice the baptism was. And then she said, “Tina has had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn’t it?”

The pastor suggested that Tina should come to see him, along with her husband, and they could then discuss the possibility of baptism. But the woman looked down and said, “Tina doesn’t have a husband. She was confirmed in this church, attended youth fellowship. But then, well, she got involved with this older boy, and soon she became pregnant. She is only eighteen.” The pastor said something about bringing this request to the attention of the Session, and he promised to contact Tina soon.

When the pastor presented the request to baptize Tina’s baby before the Session, there was some mumbling. Who was the father? The pastor said he didn’t know. How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she would be making in the baptism? How could they be sure about anybody’s promise? After some shuffling about, the baptism was approved for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

When that Sunday arrived, the sanctuary was filled, as it always is just before Christmas. The weather turned out to be free of the snow that had been predicted, and there was a huge crowd, with few empty seats. After singing “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” the pastor announced, “And now, would those to be presented for baptism please come forward?”

An Elder of the church stood and read off a 3x5 card: “Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism.” He awkwardly stared at the card. Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding 2-month old James in her arms, with a blue pacifier in his mouth. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the Elders had anticipated. Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there, though, they could not help but think of another mother and another baby – so young, so alone – long ago. Then there was another young, unwed mother, in somewhat similarly difficult circumstances. In another place and time, Tina and Mary seemed like close sisters.

When the pastor came to that point in this church's traditional baptism service when he asked, "And who stands with this child?" ... he looked at Tina's mother, dressed in her meager way, and nodded toward her. With some hesitation, she stood self-consciously and moved toward her daughter and grandson. The pastor's eyes went back to his service book to proceed with the questions to be posed of Tina, but he suddenly became aware of some movement within the congregation. A couple of Elders stood up and started to the front, and then Tina's 6th grader Sunday School teacher came forward, and then a new young couple in the church stood up. And then before the pastor's astonished eyes, the entire congregation was on its feet, moving forward, clustering around the baby and the Madonna.

Tina was crying. Her mother was gripping the altar rail as if she were clutching the railing of a tossing ship at sea. And little James, as the water touched his forehead, grew peaceful and calm as if he could feel this warm embrace all around him. The entire congregation gathered as if this were their child, as if they were all family. The Scripture reading that morning was the passage from 1 John – "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." In that baptism, these ancient words became alive, became clothed in flesh ... for cradled in their midst was a child, reflecting all the love of God with us.

This night we celebrate the wondrous news that a baby, a wonderful baby, has been born into our family. By that baby and his extraordinary life, we have been made a family. Perhaps you are here tonight by yourself. Perhaps you find yourself with not much family, or maybe you have lost the family that had been yours, and perhaps your family is far away, separated by many miles.

But do you hear tonight that gracious rustling in the pews as your family, the whole human family takes shape around the manger beneath a starry sky? Do you feel those by your sides, having familiar faces as well as those unknown, somehow becoming brothers and sisters, and all of you taking your places around a simple manger, a blessed child?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

What is that Word? "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God." And so we are. And so we are.