

21.12.05 – John 1.1-18 – Love Made from Scratch

When did the Incarnation/Gospel begin?

Hello, PBCC! My name is Eugene and I am one of the pastors here. It has been exactly three months to the day since I last had the opportunity to share with you from the Word of God; I've been spending the time in between getting to know you – and I still have a long way to go! You've also been getting to know me a bit, and this morning I'd like to share with you one more piece – or should we say "slice" – of information about myself:

I love pies. I really love pies. I love pies of any kind: sweet pies; savory pies; fruit pies; meat pies; I've never tried a pie I didn't, on some level, love. And I love how available they are, especially during this time of year. Eating a pie was a special treat for us when I was younger; I had no idea they could just be bought at a store or a bakery, whole or by the slice! I ate three slices of pie just this week in my car on my way home from the office!

Of course, homemade pies are the best. There is something different about a pie made "from scratch" by the hands of someone close to you. The reason I didn't know pies could just be bought was that my mother always made them herself for my sister and me when we were children. I still remember the smell and the taste of those apple pies. Always "from scratch".

As I got older, I began thinking about pies more seriously – and, at some point in pie-ous meditations, I came across a quote about pie by the astronomer and educator Carl Sagan. He said, "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

This is easily the most profound thought about pie to have ever been thought – and, of course, it's true: To make something "from scratch" means to make something from nothing. And if we take that phrase seriously, it means we must go beyond buying, peeling, and cutting the apples for our apple pie to planting the apple tree ourselves. It means we must go beyond buying flour and butter for the pie crust to planting the wheat and raising the cows ourselves. And it means we can't just buy a pie tin – it means mining the iron ore buried deep within the mountains and smelting it into steel and shaping the steel into a tin ourselves.

Not only that, but we must ourselves bury the iron ore in the mountains, and even bring the mountains into existence. And to create mountains, we must shape and guide the tectonic plates of the earth's stony crust to collide with one another – in fact, we must create the earth itself.

We must create our planet from stardust, and the stars from matter, and the matter from atoms, and the atoms from subatomic particles. We must send the first electrons flying through their clouds and valences around the first protons and neutrons.

And we must do all this even before we invent language and literacy and communications technology and agriculture and society and governance and utilities, as well as the human beings using them, so that we can download a recipe on our smartphone for our apple pie. "To make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

Of course, this is not at all what people mean when they say they made something "from scratch". But it does raise the question of when a pie begins: How far back does the beginning of a single pie go? When does a pie begin? And not just pie, but anything to which we set our attention. And with our attention being set these days of Advent on the Birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, and the Gospel He brought to us, it is natural for us to wonder, When did the Gospel begin? How far back does the beginning of the Gospel go?

The Synoptics' Approach to the Gospel

As Bernard shared with us last Sunday, each of the Gospel writers answered this question in complementary but different ways. Let's briefly review those beginnings:

Mark began his Gospel with John the Baptist calling those with ears to hear to prepare the way of the Lord. In the Gospel of Mark, the Good News begins with the announcement of God's Kingdom, that God's Chosen King had come.

Luke, however, began his Gospel a generation earlier, starting with John the Baptist's parents and Jesus' virgin mother. In the Gospel of Luke, the Good News begins with the eyewitness testimonies of the so-called little people who first welcomed Jesus into the world.

But Matthew took it even farther back in time: As we saw last week, Matthew began his Gospel with a genealogy that connects the Incarnation of Jesus to the full sweep of Israel's history. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Good News begins with Abraham, presenting Jesus as the culmination of Israel's hope.

Each of these three Gospels begin at a specific space and time in human history. They tell the story from the ground up, so to speak, from the level of our human experience.

John's Approach to the Gospel

But as is so often the case, the Fourth Gospel presents things differently. Like the eagle that eventually became his mascot, John soared upward, zooming out of human history until he left it entirely: In the Gospel of John, the Good News begins in the eternal past of pre-creation where nothing existed besides the Godhead, the Trinity. John started his Gospel, so to speak, "from scratch" – **John 1:1-3**:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Seeing as how PBCC has visited the Prologue of John many times in the last two years (as recently as two weeks ago), I won't retread every exegetical point that could be made about them. I will simply remind you of a few themes that shape these verses, beginning with how they echo Genesis 1:1:

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The first three words (just two in the Greek translation of the Old Testament) of John 1:1 are identical to the opening of Genesis 1:1, arguably the most famous phrase in human literature.

We know exactly what is being referred to when we hear the phrase, "In the beginning" – and John's original audience would have as well. With those words, "In the beginning", John's Gospel transports us to the space before space, the time before time. This is the primordial, eternal past, the pre-creation nothingness where only God existed. And, it turns out, He already existed as a community of Persons, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity.

The Son is referred to as **"The Word"** in **John 1:1-3**, the narrative of God, the exegesis of God, which tells us that He is the self-expression of God – God the Son is the Living Word who makes God the Father known to us.

That the Son is the self-expression of the Father is reinforced by how close they are depicted in these verses: **"the Word was with God, and the Word was God [...] He was in the beginning with God."**

And as the Father's self-expression, the Living Word executes the will of the Father – for example, God the Son executed the will of God the Father in carrying out the work of Creation – **verse 3: "All things were made through him, [through Jesus, the Living Word,] and without him was not any thing made that was made."**

But jumping to the end of the prologue, we are reminded that Jesus, the Living Word, also executed God the Father's will in redeeming fallen Creation by revealing to us the **"grace and truth"** of God – **verses 14, 16-17: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. [...] For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."** God had revealed something of Himself to His people through Moses so many generations ago: **"For the law was given through Moses"** – a law that both mediated between God and His people but also separated them on account of God's holiness. Indeed, God revealed to and through Moses something of His **"grace and truth"**, His covenant faithfulness, His unfailing love.

But in Jesus Christ, we have received the full communication of God's **"grace and truth"**; in Jesus, the Living Word, God revealed not only the train of His glory but the fullness of His unfailing love. And He did this by becoming a human, by donning a body, with which He could live and move and dwell among us – and, ultimately, die for us: **"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"**, a human tabernacle that brought God near to us.

Only Jesus could have done this. Only Jesus, the Living Word of God, very God of very God, eternally begotten but not made – only God the Son could have revealed to us the heart of God the Father. John reminded his readers of this in **verse 18: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."**

"The Father's side" is a rather soft translation of the original text – the Greek behind it means something closer to **"the bosom-embrace of the Father"**. Jesus, the Living Word of God, was eternally sunk into the bearhug of the Father's love. Who better to reveal the heart of God, then, than the One who had lived throughout eternity past listening to God's heartbeat?

John's point, then, is that Jesus is uniquely qualified to reveal to us the heart of God. No one before or after Christ could claim these things of themselves. As Shawn put it, "No one has ever said what Jesus has said or done what Jesus has done." And this uniqueness is rooted in Jesus' coequality with God, in the intimate fellowship the Father and the Son shared for before space was space and time was time.

For John, then, the Gospel begins with Jesus' identity as the Living Word of God. Whereas the other Gospel writers emphasized the human historical context surrounding Jesus' arrival, John soared high above human history to the bosom-embrace of God, where Father and Son dwelled eternally in the perfect love of the Spirit. It is as if John is saying that this is where the Gospel truly, ultimately began, in the love shared between the Father and the Son – a love that could not be contained but overflowed into the creation of a world and of a people who could marvel at it.

And not only marvel at this love, but participate in it as well. At the center of the prologue, **verses 12-13**, John reminded his readers of the purpose for which **"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"**:

"To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." You see, brothers and sisters, it was God's will in the eternal past to invite others into His bosom-embrace, to be wrapped up in the bearhug of His love. It was God the Father's will that God the Son come to us to give us **"the right to become children of God"**, to enter into their love by the power of the Spirit. And time and time again throughout His ministry, Jesus reaffirmed the Father's will for His people and for Himself – most famously in **John 3:16**:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The love shared between the Father and the Son in the eternal, pre-creation past could not be contained – no, it had to be shared, it had to overflow, it had to be expressed and spoken into Creation, even were it to fall into Sin. And so the Living Word, the Son of God, Jesus, was sent **"that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"** – an invitation offered in love to participate in the love shared between Father and Son forever. From before the foundation of the world, the Father willed for His Son to invite us into His bosom-embrace.

And John, the author of this Gospel, the Beloved Disciple, knew the bosom-embrace of God the Son. In **John 13:23**, the disciple **"whom Jesus loved"** is depicted **"reclining at table at Jesus' side"** – the exact same word translated as 'side' in verse 18; at their last supper together, the beloved disciple was in the bosom-embrace of Jesus, previewing for us the love of God into which we have been invited: a love without fear, a love without insecurity, an honest and intimate love.

And it was to this intimate love that John spent his life inviting others to experience for themselves. Writing to the churches he pastored in **1 John 1:1-3**, John made his apostolic heart clear:

“That which was from the beginning, [...] that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The Living Word had come to John, and through the Living Word, John came to know the unfailing love of God. And John committed his life to sharing with others the Living Word, so that they, too, could know the unfailing love of God and join in bosom-embrace **“with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”**

And all of this began before the beginning of the world. All of this began before the first trees sprouted, before the first mountains rose, before the first planets formed around the Sun, before the first stars lit the void of space, before the first electrons occupied the first orbitals of the first atomic nuclei. Before space was space, before time was time, in the bosom-embrace of God was the already, unfailing love that would bring the Living Word to us, enfleshed in humanity.

In other words, the Gospel started “from scratch”; God made the Gospel for us “from scratch”; God loved us “from scratch.” And unlike Carl Sagan, we aren’t being facetious in saying this – we mean that literally. John’s literary choice here reflects literal reality: God loved us “from scratch”, from before the foundation of the world – indeed, this is the very language the Apostle Paul used when he affirmed the same truth to the Ephesians – **Ephesians 1:3-5**:

God’s love is previous.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ [...], even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world [...] In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will[.]” Now, the mere mention of predestination may trigger in some of us questions of freewill and God’s sovereignty – good questions, I should say, questions that should be addressed to the best of our theological ability sooner or later.

But when we look at these verses through the lens of the Father-Son theme of **John 1:1-18**, they make sense in a way that goes beyond the theological and the philosophical to the practical and parental. What Paul was talking about in **Ephesians 1:3-5** is the same as what John was talking about in **John 1:1-18**: God the Father sent Jesus His Son to adopt us into His family, to be wrapped up in the bearhug of His unfailing love. And the decision to adopt us was made **“before the foundation of the world”**, before any of us existed.

This commitment to love us before we existed is something anyone who has been a parent, will be a parent, or has witnessed the goodness of parenthood – even if only by the hollow shape left by its absence – this is something we can understand with or without a theological degree. Both passages became real to me in way they hadn’t been before when my wife Hae-Rin and I found out she was pregnant with our first child, William.

Those early days after the first positive pregnancy test were a blur of excitement and fear and appointments and more tests. But one of those days, as I was driving home from work, I was still for just long enough to become overwhelmed by a single emotion, a single thought. I felt a sense of deep-diving, high-soaring pride. And I was confused: Why was I feeling proud? What was I proud of? Of all the feelings I had been feeling, pride felt most out of place to me.

I talked with God about this pride, and the Spirit helped me see that I was proud of my child – not of us as parents or of the new life we were heading into, but of the child. And that only confused me more, because for all my life pride was an emotion associated with accomplishment; pride is the feeling you get when you do something great. But what had this child – this embryo – done? What had this child accomplished? Nothing! It simply existed.

And yet, that was enough. Existing was enough to be worthy of pride, worthy of joy, worthy of love. And the Spirit said to me, “Eugene, you love this cluster of cells, this embryo, this child already, with all your heart. Before this child has accomplished or achieved anything, you love this child. Hold onto this love, this already love. Because as this child grows, you will be tempted to love him or her because of what he or she can do, because of how well he or she can perform. But that isn’t the love of a father, Eugene, that isn’t the love of a parent. Parents love their children already, before they have done a single good thing, and even after they’ve done many bad things. The love of a parent is an already love, preceding any performance. Hold onto this love you feel right now.”

And He added one more thing: “And Eugene, know that this is how God the Father loves you and all who are in Jesus Christ.” And brothers and sisters, this Second Sunday of Advent, I believe this is the Spirit’s message to us from the Word we have been studying: “Before space was space and time was time, from before the beginning, from before the foundation of the world, God loved you ‘from scratch’. His love is an already love, a love that precedes our performance, the unfailing love of a parent for their children. And He sent His Son from the bosom-embrace of the Godhead to be born into this world and to share this already love with you.”

God’s love is unconditional & unrepayable

That this love, this already love, was made “from scratch” suggests two things for us: (1) First, God’s love for us is unconditional; and (2) God’s love for us is unrepayable.

God’s love for us is unconditional in that it is offered to us without us having earned it, without us having done anything at all to merit it. It comes to us as a gift, like a child born, like a Savior Incarnated. It comes to us as Christmas morning: Like children who have done nothing to cause the world to turn and the dawn to break and the tree to be lit and presents to appear underneath its boughs, like children bounding down the hallway to open the gifts already prepared for them, so we come to the love of God as a gift prepared in the dark watches of the pre-creation night, in the darkness of the nothingness before space was space and time was time.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: Yes, when we receive this love, we enter into a covenant with God, a covenant with promises – promises of curses or blessings; and predicating those promises are stipulations – stipulations, commands, yes, conditions! We keep the covenant with our faith which

shows up in our lives through our choices and decisions and actions! So yes, there are conditions, in a way, to God's unconditional love!

But while this might seem like a thorny theological issue, any tension is once again resolved in the parent-child metaphor: Children are born into their parents' love – but should they run away from home, they will not enjoy it; their enjoyment of their parents' love, unconditionally offered, is conditioned on their choice to remain in that love, to receive that love, to live under their roof and receive their bearhug embrace. How can children know their parents' love if they run away from home? But if they choose to return, the already, unfailing love of a parent will be ready to welcome them back home – with tears, with grief, with repentance, yes, but beneath and in and through all these, with love.

This was, after all, one of the main points of Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, wasn't it? The story of the prodigal was intended to illustrate for hard-hearted Pharisees how the love of God truly looked, sounded, and felt. Jesus, the Living Word, revealed the love of God in the eyes of the father who anxiously scanned the horizon for any sign of his son's return; Jesus, the Living Word, revealed the love of God in the arms of the father wrapped in bearhug around the filthy scraps clothing his son's body; Jesus, the Living Word, revealed the love of God in the tears that flowed from the father's eyes, in the father's command that the fattened calf be slaughtered, in the father's singing and dancing and celebrating that this child who once was lost was found, that this child who once was dead had been raised to life.

And so the love of God comes to us, unfailing and true, faithful and trustworthy, before any of our good works, before any of our obedience, before any of our merit or achievement or performance, already prepared to embrace us. And it comes to us not to lay upon us the burden of repayment, but to lift us into the belovedness which was always our true inheritance.

Remember how the father in Jesus' parable cuts his son off mid-sentence when he returned? On his way home, the prodigal had rehearsed a speech declaring his intention to work for the father he had so deeply wronged. "Treat me like one of your hired hands," he was prepared to say. "Maybe he can give me a job." But either because he was overwhelmed by his father's love, or because his father simply wouldn't hear it, when he found himself back in his father's embrace, the son never got to that part, never got the chance to declare his intention to pay his father back, to be his slave and not his son.

God's love cannot be repaid. It was never intended to be repaid. As the Psalmist declared, the God of Creation, the Owner of the Cattle of a Thousand Hills, needs nothing from His people, nothing from their pockets or wallets or savings accounts, nothing of their wealth or resource. All things come from Him, after all – if He were ever to feel hunger, would He ask us to provide? To meet His needs? To feed Him from our hands? As Paul admonished the Corinthians, is it the children's responsibility to save for their parents? No, but the parents take upon themselves the call to meet their children's needs – and whereas that may change with our earthly parents, we never outgrow our Heavenly Father!

The only repayment God desires of His beloved children is their gratitude and trust. And is this not true of human parents as well? Should this not be true, at least? That parents desire only for their children to know their faithfulness, to know their devotion, to know their commitment to provide and to protect, to lead and to guide, to love and to forgive – and, in response, to love, trust, and obey?

Now, I recognize that for some – or many – of us, this may be a painful sermon to hear. It may be painful because it reminds us that we did not have or that we are not ourselves the kind of parents that illustrate the unconditional, unrepayable, already, unfailing love of God for His children. When we look back at our childhoods, or when we look back at how we ourselves raised our children, we might feel that love and merit were not at all detached, that love and performance were not at all decoupled, that love was predicated upon accomplishments and achievements. Perhaps we were shown a love that had to be earned; perhaps we passed on that kind of love to our own children, or to the people in our lives around us, children or not.

And the memory of this un-love haunts us, especially at this time, during the holidays. When we see seemingly everyone around us enjoying time with family and friends, making and looking forward to keeping plans to reconnect and reunite – we look at all this familial love, and it only deepens our sense of loneliness and woundedness, only widens the ache of our grief that we weren't loved the way we should have been, or that we didn't love the way God has loved us.

Brothers and sisters, if this is how you feel, if this is what you brought into our service today, I understand. I'm there with you. I know what it feels like to be caught in seemingly endless cycles of trauma, to be caught in a time loop of defensiveness and coping mechanisms – the holidays always seem to bring out the best and worst in us and in our families, don't they? I understand – but more importantly, God understands; God sees, God knows, and God grieves for the un-love you have felt.

And here in the dark of irresolution, in the darkness of anger and anxiety, in the emptiness and void of conflict and woundedness and a pervading sense of worthlessness, in the unresolved tension of pre-redemption, before healing heals and restoration is restoring, in the heart of God there beats a love for you and for me that goes back farther than our oldest familial wounds. There is between God the Father and God the Son a love that precedes all performance, an already, unfailing love that began long before the trauma traditions of our earthly families.

And this love which existed before space was space and time was time, moved God to cause light to shine into the darkness, to gather that light into stars and to set planets spinning around those stars – and on one of those planets, the love of God moved Him to bury in its mountains the iron that would one day be fashioned into nails, and to plant trees that would one day be shaped into a cross, so that one day the Son of God, the Living Word, could be crucified for the forgiveness of our sins.

And by the Holy Spirit, by His work in the Incarnation and in the Illumination of our hearts, we can receive this already, unfailing love, this love that precedes performance, this love that takes us as we are, before we've done anything good. We can receive this love which is the true gift of Christmas: The right to become sons and daughters, the children of God, by the will of God from before the foundation of the world.

And in this love, in the bosom-embrace of the unfailing love of God, we can begin rebuilding our identities. We can demolish the old self-identifications based on achievements and successes, and we can rebuild our identities on our belovedness. We can be children again, children wrapped up in the bearhug of God's love for us. And that belovedness can become the foundation to a new hope, a new joy, and a new peace, not only during the season of Advent but for the rest of our lives. This love which stands outside time, which began before the beginning, can interrupt our endless trauma cycles and write a new story in their place.

So, brothers and sisters, won't you partake of this love with me? A love that goes deeper than your worthiness, that lifts you higher than your achievements, a love that remains forever because it was from forever?

This is the purpose of the Lord's Supper, of Communion, to which we know come. I'd like to invite the band to return to the stage, and I invite you to approach the table with this in mind, with this love in mind, like children approaching a table set for us by loving parents, a table full of nourishing, delicious, food, a table where there is always a seat available to us, a table prepared without our help and with the truest of loves.

Let us remember the love that is spread on this table. Let us remember that Jesus, the Living Word, revealed the fullness of God's already, unfailing love to us by coming to us, motivated by commitments made before the foundation of the world, taking on human flesh in space and time, and dying for us, on our behalf, as a sacrifice to cleanse us of our sins, so that we might have the right to become children of God.

Let us take a few moments to reflect on this love, to lower our defenses, to surrender our suspicions, and to receive its fullness.

As we partake in Communion, let us do so with this love in mind. ²³[...] **the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'**" Let us eat together.

²⁵**In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'**" Let us drink together.