

“Miss Mildred’s Blanket”

Luke 2:1-7

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The Woodside Church

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Some children have a favorite stuffed animal. Some hold on to a treasured toy. Some of the gifts you opened this morning may be a friend for life. For my daughter Kristin it was her blankies. She loves her blankies. Now these blankies were actually old diapers we used as burping cloths. She loved the soft fabric against her cheek.

Kristin actually gave names to some of the blankies. One was called “Liney” because of the lines on it. They went everywhere – school, church, grandma’s house. As she grew older I asked her to leave them home. She didn’t like that. Finally I insisted she not bring a blankie to school. She agreed. I drove her to school. She got out of the car, closed the door, opened her backpack, pulled out her blankie, waved it at me and then ran for the school. I just had to laugh.

One time she brought Liney to church. During the service, it fell under the pew. The family sitting in the pew behind them had a young child. Assuming the blankie was theirs, they picked it up and Liney was gone. Kristin was beside herself. I felt awkward asking for it back because they were visitors. To Kristin they were kidnappers. She begged me to call them and demand them to release their hostage. When the next new member’s class came, I called them and asked if they would like to join. The husband replied, “Thank you but we are attending another church.” “That’s fine,” I replied. I paused, took a breath, and said, “Well then can you help me with something?” “Yes, what’s that?” the husband answered. “Do you have my daughter’s...blankie?” “Blankie?” “Uh, yeah, you know – it’s a small blanket. It’s really a diaper but she loves it.” “What’s it look like?” “Well, it has lines on it. It answers to the name Liney.” “Ok pastor. If we find it we’ll be sure to get it back to you.” We never saw Liney again.

Permit me to tell one more blankie story. Of all the memories of Christmas mornings, the one most precious to me is the year when Peter was six and Kristin was three. All on their own, without a single word from Lisa or me, they came down from their bedrooms with arms full. Not with presents. Peter carried a cradle. “I have the manger,” he proudly said. And then came Kristin with her baby doll. “And I have baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes.” It was one of her blankies. They laid Jesus in the manger under the tree and before we opened a single present, we knelt as a family and thanked God the Father for His great gift of love.

Of all the gifts God gives: faith, hope, peace, joy – love is at the heart of them all. The Apostle John wrote, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (I John 4:16). He did not say God is wrath, power or wisdom. He did not say God is sentimental, desperate or needy. Some things are made of plastic, steel or wood. You

might say God is made of love. God pours out love – freely, constantly, and endlessly. We cannot survive without His love.

God loves you so much He wanted to do more than shine His love from above. Love came down at Christmas, wrapped in the flesh of a newborn babe. “Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” (Luke 2:7). The God of Love moved into our neighborhood. Why? God wants to place His love in you. He wants you to live in His love. What’s God’s love like?

It’s **Costly**. The most famous passage in the Bible says it best:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

He didn’t send another prophet, priest or king. He didn’t dispatch an angel, archangel or the entire heavenly host to do the job. He sent His one and only Son. God sent His Son as a helpless, powerless baby. He sent His Son into enemy territory and certain danger. He sent His Son on a rescue mission to save you and me. You can tell how much someone loves you by what they are willing to sacrifice for you. When the Son left the gates of heaven, the Father knew He was going to His death. That’s how much God loves you.

Do you understand the incredibly high cost of God’s gift? On the PBS series Antiques Roadshow people bring items from home so an expert can appraise its worth. Often the owners are stunned by the value of what they have. A man from Tucson, Arizona, inherited an old blanket he threw over the back of a rocking chair. Sensing it might be worth something, he brought it to the show.

With the blanket hanging on a rack behind them, the expert appraiser told the man his heart stopped when he first saw it. It was a Navajo chief’s blanket woven in the 1840s. In wonderful condition, it was one of the oldest, intact Navajo weaves to survive and certainly one of only a tiny handful to exist outside of museum collections. Because of its rarity and significance, the appraiser had no trouble assigning a value of somewhere between \$350,000 and \$500,000.

When the owner came to the show he casually carried the blanket in. Now he knew its value he walked out with security guards on either side of him, drove straight to a bank, and placed the blanket in the vault. It was instantly transformed into a precious treasure.

We get so wrapped up in the wrapping of Christmas we miss the treasure – Jesus. We repeat John 3:16 but we miss the high price God paid to get us back. Don’t ever say, “I’m worthless. I’m useless. I’m nothing.” Not to God. Open your eyes and see the incredible, immense, immeasurable cost God gave to save you. Don’t glibly toss Jesus aside like an old dusty blanket. Unwrap the gift of love God gave you on Christmas.

When you receive God’s gift of love, you start to live in love. You find God’s love **Cures**. It heals relationships. John writes,

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. I John 4:12-13

A healed and forgiven relationship with God naturally leads to healing and forgiving relationships with people in your life. Jesus says the world will know we are His disciples if we love one another (John 13:34-35). If we say we love God but refuse to love or forgive our sisters or brothers there is something wrong. We are still blocking the power of God's love in our lives. If we are willing, with God's love, to make the first move and start to heal a relationship we'll find God will be there to help us heal.

Stephanie Seymour is a super model. She appeared in fashion magazines and music videos for the rock group Guns N Roses. In 1995 she married Peter Brant, a publisher and real estate developer. In 2009 Seymour filed for divorce. It quickly became a bitter and messy fight. The couple only communicated through their lawyers. Then, at one point, Seymour did something unusual. She decided to personally give a sentimental memento back to her husband: a Navajo blanket. It was the first time they'd spoken directly to each other in some time. Stephanie told Peter,

Let's get rid of all of these people. I have confidence in you, and I hope that deep down you have confidence in me, that we can work this out.

She later told Town and Country magazine, "The 'dirty fight' is all about winning, not healing." They went to counseling and eventually reconciled.

If the simple gesture of a Navajo blanket can open the door to healing, imagine what can happen if God's love leads the way. Christmas is a time for family but it is also a time when relationships are tested, stretched and sometimes snapped. Is there some relationship in your life that needs God's healing, forgiveness and love? Is there a first step you can take today, Christmas day, to open the door? It won't be easy. This isn't a hallmark Christmas special. It will take courage, patience, forgiveness and time. But if you take that step, God will be there to help you take the next one.

Once you receive God's costly gift of love, once you start curing and healing the relationships closest to you, you discover the third truth of God's love: it's **Contagious**. Those who live in God's love can't keep it to themselves. It spreads beyond your family and friends to acquaintances, strangers and even enemies. Christmas is often about "getting." We ask, "What did you get for Christmas?" There's nothing wrong with that. But the true meaning of Christmas is about giving. "God so loved the world He *gave*." When you think about it, giving presents is easy. Giving yourself is harder. Giving gifts on one day of the year is relatively cheap. Giving yourself all through the year is a challenge. But until you give God's love you'll never get Christmas. And if you start to freely give God's love it will get contagious. You'll want to give more and more. Everyone knows John 3:16. But what about 1 John 3:16 and following:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions

and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. I John 3:16-18

If you only take love you will become selfish. If you give love it becomes contagious.

Lauren Blakemore was 13 years old when she was diagnosed with cancer. She had a rare and aggressive form - a primitive neuroectodermal tumor. There are only 450 cases diagnosed each year. The tumors invade bones and often lead to loss of limbs. Now when Lauren received this dreadful news, you might expect her to curl up into a ball of despair. Yet something else happened. Lauren heard a sermon at her home church, Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky and she knew God wanted her to do mission work with cancer kids. She said, "I can give them hope by telling my story."

Being so sick, what could Lauren do? She faced 14 rounds of chemotherapy and 25 radiation treatments. Despite the terrible odds against her, Lauren is today a cancer survivor. Her recovery is considered a miracle. During that long and difficult battle, Lauren found comfort from a gift she received before she was born—a blanket. A neighbor named Mildred made a bright, multi-colored quilt as a baby gift for Lauren. This "Miss Mildred" blanket was always Lauren's favorite. She snuggled it through childhood and then through the nausea, fatigue, and sleepless nights of treatment.

During this time Lauren's dad visited a children's cancer ward in India and returned home to tell her about the kids. That's when Lauren finally knew what God wanted her to do. Immediately, Lauren began to raise money by speaking at Rotary Club meetings and schools. She wanted every child to have a "Miss Mildred" blanket because "chemotherapy makes you cold all the time." At the same time, Lauren heard about a group in Bosnia called Peace Crafts. Missionaries from her church helped start this cottage industry to give women in this war torn nation the ability to earn an income. Lauren asked the ladies to make a "Miss Mildred" blanket to warm every child's bed in the cancer ward. "When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I knew God had a plan for my life," Lauren said. "This is part of that plan."¹

Today, by offering a blanket, you can share God's costly, curing, contagious love with the world. Come wrap Jesus with your gift of love.

¹ Ruth Schenk, "Lauren's Mission," The Southeast Outlook (11-24-05).