

**The Word Made Flesh**  
John 1:1-14  
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On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, I was bustling around the house – wrapping a few last-minute presents, finishing up some baking, tidying up. I came across Mark who had replaced a burned out light bulb in the kitchen and was now washing all the dust off the light fixture before replacing it. “Thanks!” I said in surprise. “Hey,” he answered, “It’s the season for going above and beyond.”

Indeed it is. And it is in moments like these, I think, that we experience love. For when we love someone, we find ways to make that love known. To make it tangible.

For all the romantic hype in our culture, we know that love is not really about adoring compliments or lofty sentiments. It is not about butterflies in your stomach or the goofy grin on your face when you think about your beloved. It is not about valentines or romantic dinners. Eventually, and ultimately, love is made real in action. It is made known in tangible ways that are often unglamorous and unfulfilling in their own right.

It’s the father who wakes in the middle of the night to comfort a frightened child so his wife can get a little more sleep.

It’s preparing a favorite home-cooked meal for a loved one who’s had a rough day.

It’s sitting in the counselor’s office, working on your marriage, when leaving seems so much easier.

It’s playing a game with your child when you’d rather read the newspaper.

Or going to the doctor with your elderly mother.

Or wiping the mouth of your ailing father.

It is in these moments, these countless moments that happen day in and day out, that love is made known.

A friend once told me that he and his wife did premarital counseling before their wedding. A lot of counselors will do profiles and compatibility tests to try to identify potential problem areas. Their counselor had a different approach. “I don’t believe in compatibility,” he said. “I believe in commitment.” Words alone don’t matter. We know this. Someone can say “I love you” until they are blue in the face, but how do we really know it? We know it by how they live, how they put the commitment of love into action.

Former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O’Connor has been married for more than fifty years. Her husband has advanced Alzheimer’s and now lives in an assisted living facility where he can get the care he needs. Their son recently shared that his father, who no longer recognizes the members of his family, has made a new lady friend, another resident of the home. Rather than feel betrayed by this new relationship, Sandra Day O’Connor has chosen to be glad that her husband has found a measure of happiness in the midst of the darkness of his illness. She sits and visits with the couple as they hold hands on the porch of the home. This is love at its deepest and most mature, a love that cares more for the other than for the self, a love made real and tangible.

This is the love that has its source and greatest expression in God. What else is Scripture if not the story of God making love known to us over and over again?

In love, God wanted something more and so at the dawn of time called out of the chaos the beauty of creation – day and night, land and sea, plants and animals, and at last, humans made in God’s image.

In love, God gave Noah and his family a fresh beginning and placed the rainbow in the sky as a sign that the earth would never be destroyed by floods again.

In love, God called an elderly and barren couple, Abraham and Sarah, to be the parents of a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the stars.

In love, God heard the cries of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt, and led them through the wilderness into the Promised Land, feeding them with manna from heaven and leading them with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

In love, God gave the Law to Moses to show the people of Israel how to live in community together.

In love, God sent the prophets to guide the people of Israel back to faithfulness when they had gone astray.

Over and over again, God’s love was made real, not just in words, but in concrete and tangible signs. And yet despite all of these efforts, still humans turned away from God. They failed to recognize the signs of God’s love, or they soon forgot them. And so at last God chose another way to make that love real. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.

God fully entered the human condition. God showed us love by becoming as we are. This the miracle of grace the angel called Emmanuel, God-with-us. God moved from remoteness to closeness. No more can we think of God as some distant monarch enthroned in the heavens, for God came and walked among us. God’s love became tangible and real as never before.

Thomas got an ant farm for Christmas (not from Mark and me, I might add), and for the last few days we’ve all enjoyed watching the ants as they busily make their tunnels. What do the ants make of the giant human faces that peer into their habitat every now and then? If they are aware of us at all, they probably only perceive us as shadows. They likely have no capacity to comprehend something as big and complex as humans. In something of the same way, we humans have always been utterly limited in our ability to perceive and understand the divine. The many initiatives made by God through the centuries have helped bridge that gulf between us. But nothing has helped us understand the divine quite like the incarnation.

We can understand the mystery of God in a new way because God is revealed in the person of Jesus. If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. In him, we discover what matters to God. And what do we find? In the pages of the New Testament, we see Jesus over and over again go to the ones on the edge, on the margin, the ones who society has cast out and called nothing. We see Jesus dine with tax collectors and prostitutes, we see him touch lepers

and heal a bent over woman. We see him welcome children and befriend fishermen. These are the ones that Jesus calls beloved, and first in the Kingdom of God. In Jesus, we see the heart of God poured out for all people, and especially for the least of these. God's love made real in the person of Jesus helps us understand God in a new way.

It also helps us know that God understands humanity in a new way. Perhaps you've noticed or experienced the way a bond is created between people who have been through a similar experience. When I was a mission volunteer in Central America, I was warned that I might experience "reverse culture shock" upon returning to the U.S. And indeed it was difficult as I tried to integrate all I had experienced and learned into my life back at home. As much as I had been a foreigner while in Central America, when I returned home, I felt like an outsider there, too. I found refuge in those who had been through something similar. We could share stories. Listen. Support one another. And realize that we weren't alone. There is a profound relief to knowing that there are others who can relate to what you are going through – whether you are learning to parent a new baby, grieving the loss of a spouse, or struggling to overcome an addiction.

Because of the incarnation, because of the Word made flesh, we know that God understands our human condition. We share a common bond. Jesus knew the joys of our human life. He knew the love of parents for their child, he knew the delight of laughter and stories around a table, he knew the companionship of dear friends, intimate communion with the divine in prayer, the stunning beauty of creation.

But so, too, did God come to know the pain of our world. Jesus knew what it meant to suffer cold, to flee as a refugee, to grieve the loss of a loved one, to flare with anger at injustice, to be overwhelmed by the demands of the world, to be betrayed by a friend, to feel utterly alone.

This is the gift of the incarnation. We know that no matter what our human joy or pain, God understands, for God has been there. John Claypool once told about a play that gives expression to this aspect of Christmas. It was written by a German Lutheran minister named Guenter Rutenborn in 1945.

*...Germany was reeling from the impact of the terrible World War II, and the Pastor Rutenborn is trying to struggle with the question that was on so many people's minds back in that day, namely, who was responsible for the terrible agony that the world had experienced through World War II. And so the play begins with a group of refugees, displaced persons, milling around, asking who's to blame, and the various answers that were in the air were voiced there.*

*Some said Hitler was to blame; others said, "No, it was the munitions manufacturers who financed him." Others said it was the apathy of the German people, but then suddenly a man comes up out of the crowd and says, "Do you want to know who is really to blame for all the suffering we've been through? I'll tell you. God is to blame. He is the one that created this world. He is the one who has let it be what it is." And everybody catches up the chorus. They turn with one voice to say, "God is to blame. God is to blame."*

*And so in the play, God is brought down on the stage and is put in the dock, and God is tried for the crime of creation. He is found guilty and the judge says, "The crime is so severe that there are going to have to be the worst of all sentences. I hereby sentence God to have to live on this earth as a human being." And the three archangels are given the task of carrying out the sentence.*

*The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to be obscure and to be poor. He will be borne on the backside of no where with a peasant girl for His mother. There will be a suspicion of shame about his birth, and He will have to live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world."*

*The second archangel starts out and says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves his sentence that He knows what it's like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will ever understand what He is trying to do."*

*The third archangel said, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to suffer. I'm going to see to it that He has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of His life, He's going to be absolutely executed in as painful a way as possible."*

*And with that the three archangels disappear. The houselights go down, and it suddenly dawns on you that God has already served that sentence. He knows what it's like to live as a human being, which means there's nothing you face today that is going to be strange to God.<sup>1</sup>*

This is the tremendous gift of Christmas, the grace of the Word made flesh, a love made tangible and real. And what do we do with this good news? How do we respond?

Perhaps we try to give others the same gift, the gift of God's love tangibly expressed, God's love made concrete in our actions and behaviors. We seek out the ones that Jesus sought – the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the lonely. And we find ways of making God's love known to them, in a meal shared, a story heard, a hand held. God's love still puts on flesh, only now it is our flesh. A prayer attributed to Theresa of Avila puts it this way:

Christ has no body now but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
not feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which  
Christ's compassion must look out on the world.  
Yours are the feet with which  
He is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands with which  
He is to bless us now.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Claypool, "God Became What We Are," *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, December 25, 1994.