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INCARNATION

What does the theological doctrine of the incarnation mean? How does it apply to our community? What about incarnational ministry is hardest for us? How can we grow in this area?

I want to keep thinking and writing about the topic of the incarnation because I really want to be part of living it out here in Athens County, in the year 2012, with you! Some of what I have written here comes out of the discussions that Paul, Doug and I had in preparation for the *Into the Neighborhood Walk* earlier this year.

First: What is the incarnation? Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth, embracing human poverty: the weakness we find in our souls, our bodies, our relationships, our societies, and our environment. Jesus became Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus was born here, lived with us, was unfairly killed, and came back to life. This was the Almighty God's incarnation into human life.

Now that Jesus has ascended to the Father and has given us the Holy Spirit, the Church is the body of Christ. Those who follow Jesus are the tangible presence of Jesus in their immediate contexts today. A *carnivore* is a creature that eats *flesh*, right? So the community of people who follow Jesus *en-flesh*, *embody* who Jesus is to the people around them. This is what we mean by the Church's incarnation. While Jesus lived on earth (and we believe this actually happened!), he sought out the people who were smallest, weakest and most rejected to spend time with. So I believe the Church is called to follow Jesus' example and actually live with the people in our societies who are most in need.

I feel relatively confident in my ability to understand the incarnation intellectually. What I struggle with is the second question: How does it apply to our community? How does it apply to me, as a part of Christ's body in Athens, Ohio? While these are very real and honest questions, I find it pure mystery (and sometimes hilarity) that God wants *us* to represent *him*! After Jesus rises from the dead, he comes to his deserter-disciples who were locked in a room out of fear and says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). They had failed him, were grieving and confused, and Jesus announces, "Okay, now it's your turn to do what I did and even better things. I'm giving you the power!" *Wow*.

The irony of why God would want to express himself through the limitedness of human beings hits me especially hard when I am sitting in a row with other Christians at 11:30 am on Sunday morning. We are passing around a tray of crackers and take solemn swallows of grape juice. (In fact, sometimes we need the grape juice to wash down the bits of cracker!) And I wonder: How the Church's celebration of the greatest, most loving person in the history of the world can be expressed in such a tame ritual, one that does not even allow us to acknowledge the person sitting next to us?

Such is our humanness. God's reality and power are so big and our capacity to embrace his Kingdom and *be* his body so small. Yet, God created humanness and has eaten many ordinary suppers with people just like us. God loves us so much that he asks us to

represent him even though we are so desperately limited. In reality, his immense power shines all the more strongly through our weakness.

Thus, the incarnation applies to us, whether we realize it or not. *We are the body of Christ.* This is the church's identity. We must ask ourselves: Are the things we are doing and saying and teaching and spending our energies on giving others an accurate view of the person of Jesus? Such a view of life and ourselves does not come naturally. We must cultivate it.

I am finding that when our theology of the incarnation is lived out, it becomes uncomfortably specific. For me in this season, it means I must grapple with the question of sacrifice. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). These are the words of Jesus. But, my natural instincts resist sacrifice, and I am not alone in this struggle! As we in the Good Works community seek to model our lives after Jesus more and more, I believe we will continue to face the question of what we must give up, both individually and collectively.

Most of you know that I believe God is directing me to move to Chauncey and form a household there that is focused on loving God and our neighbors who are struggling with poverty. When I ask the Lord about my future, I hear him saying, "I am rooting you here." And honestly, this is a joy. Yet as I consider making a commitment to Jesus in this particular way, there are things that I don't want lose, namely, close relationships with my family and geographic proximity to them.

At this time, my commitment to Jesus is expressed in a commitment to a group of believers (that includes you!), in a particular place (Athens County and Chauncey), with a specific vision (for the Church to grow here). At times, I feel I have to choose between the family and place and vision I have here, and the family I grew up with. I am physically far away from them, my attention is divided, and sometimes my heart feels torn. My relationships with my family are something I don't want to give up!

But recently, I have experienced the Lord renewing my understanding of sacrifice, which has given me freedom and joy as I anticipate making deeper commitments here. Growing up, my parent's lifestyle as missionaries forced me to sacrifice significant time with my family, and I experienced a measure of pain in this. I mistakenly believed that this pain was God's will, and that dutiful sacrifice and scarcity were the dominant experiences of the Christian life. This is in contrast to a life experience of abundance and love. As an adult, my pain led me to distancing myself from my family for safety, but also emotionally clinging to them because I always felt afraid that I would not have enough time to be with them. The thought of sacrificing something for God was a sore subject.

It is through the gentleness of the Holy Spirit and the love of God expressed in many people, including my family, that my perspective on sacrifice is being restored. I am learning to know God as good and generous, and find all my delight in him. I am slowly letting go of the discontent I have felt in my relationships with my family and instead, seeking to receive them as a gift that I actually have no right to.

In my previous experience of sacrifice, someone always "lost." In that way it felt unfair for one person to choose sacrifice, because it inevitably affected others who did not choose it. Now I am coming to understand that if God is good, and if sacrifice is the will of God, then there are no "losers." Sacrifice that is God-directed will bear great fruit for all.

Jesus says, “...unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). If God calls me to live in Athens for the rest of my life, neither my family nor I “lose” because the Father loves each of us with an everlasting love. And the Father is more than able to heal the wounds we may carry due to any loss.

So, I choose to believe that while God’s desires may bring me and others through times of pain, in the end God’s will is overwhelmingly good— worth it. As I stop clinging to the people who are most precious to me and surrender these relationships to God, I believe my love for them will not be diminished but rather grow to be more godly and full-hearted.

Jesus gives us the most beautiful example of sacrifice. His was based in love, not duty or coercion. Out of an experience of love with the Father, Jesus was sent into the world to live and to give his life. In God’s world, love is not scarce, it is abundant! And all throughout Jesus’ time on earth, the Father was with him. Jesus says of himself:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep...The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:14, 15, 17)

Jesus’ sacrifice caused severe but temporary pain for himself and those closest to him. But it was made with an eternal perspective—Jesus rose again! And then he sent the Spirit to be with us. His sacrifice was made because of and in love. He suffered but we have eternal benefit.

If we live in this deeper reality of the love of God—which the universe is built on— then I believe we can experience freedom and open-heartedness to give up what is most precious to us. I know I want to grow into a fuller belief, trust, reliance, and contentment in my Father. God’s love is the best soil for willing sacrifices made for Jesus. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12).