

# The Gift of God

by Stewart Ruch

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*God's love is a concrete and incarnational expression that comes close to humanity, demonstrated through Jesus' incarnation and the sacraments.*

**Duration:** 33:02

**Scripture:** John 1:14, Romans 8:3

**Topics:** "Grace"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker recounts a powerful experience of going to an abandoned building to share the message of Jesus. Despite the fear and darkness, they were determined to bring the light of God's love to those gathered there. The speaker emphasizes the importance of receiving the truth of God's word and engaging with it through various forms of art and storytelling. They also highlight the significance of the incarnation of Jesus, reminding the audience that through him, we have access to true love and the opportunity to live out the proclamation of God's presence among us.

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## Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruck and is part two of our Advent 2017 series. In the 1980s, when Americans were asked if they ever experienced acute, abiding loneliness, 20% said yes.

Now, in a different day, in so many ways a different culture, 40% of Americans report that they regularly experience a deep and acute loneliness. If there's nearly 500 of us gathered here this morning, that's at least 200 of you. The former Surgeon General, medically speaking, put loneliness on the same level as cancer and heart disease as a national and serious health concern for Americans.

Arguing medically that significant issues like diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic conditions are not just physiological, but are actually related to human loneliness. And we know that loneliness isn't simply being alone, that those in marriage experience acute loneliness. Those even in a robust community like ours here can feel deadening loneliness.

It marks the human condition like few other characteristics. It describes the result of the human sinful condition like few other clear adjectives. Because Jesus, fully God, became fully man, we always have access to actual love.

A love that's come close in Jesus, a love that's concrete in Jesus. We bring this gospel book, which holds within it the very words of Jesus himself, God incarnate, down here among all of us so that every single week we can live out, act out, experience in a real and embodied way the very proclamation of John 1, verse 14, that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. That every week we proclaim the incarnation of God in this very moment, this very opportunity of sacred theater.

Turn with me, if you will, to John chapter 1, there in your Bibles, there in your bulletin, as we take now a second look, building off of last week's teaching on the incarnation of God. If you're new this week, you were not here this week, I want to urge you to also listen to last week, where I expounded and taught on the first part of John chapter 1. Essential as we move into the second part of John chapter 1, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. British intellectual, mid-20th century, a woman named Dorothy Sayers said this about this verse.

This is, quote, the only thing which has ever really happened. Which is to say, this is, God incarnate in Jesus, the only thing that really only matters. Because in Jesus, become man, actual love has come close.

Actual love is manifested, experienced, and given to us in an incarnational, which is to say, concrete way. The word became flesh, actual love comes close, and dwelt among us. Actual love is given to us in a concrete way.

Closeness, it just matters. The experience of closeness to another, the assurance of closeness from a faithful friendship or relationship. There's a reason why closeness matters.

Closeness, according to this teaching here in John chapter 1, is actually one of the hallmarks. I described it last week as communion. You could use the word intimacy.

It's so hard to find the right way to describe it. But what we know is that from the very beginning of all time, eternally, Jesus has been close to his Father. Before we look at 14 more, look with me at 18.

The middle phrase in 18, the only God, Jesus, fully God, who is at the Father's side. Original language gives it to you more explicitly. Original language says, who is in the Father's bosom.

Jesus pressed up to his Father's chest. I don't know. Some of you could probably get there right away.

You remember being pressed up close to your dad. Some of you have no memory, no experience like that. But that is what's true about who God is.

Jesus at the Father's heart. Closeness. I had an incredible experience, and an unlikely one, one that I didn't think would turn out this way, of closeness with my freshman college roommate back in the 1980s.

As far as I know, you were randomly put with your roommate. There was no kind of matching or affinity going on with a roommate. There was no social media to figure out like if you're going to bring the same bedspread or whatever.

You just kind of were there. And I walked into my room. I met my roommate.

His name was CJ. And literally, you could not have, for the sake of a fun story or a sitcom episode, put two more unlikely people together than CJ and me. Everything I was, he was not.

Everything he was, I was not. Everything he liked, I didn't like. Whatever I liked, he didn't like.

And yet we lived, day in and day out, in a small dorm room, physical closeness. And that physical closeness, over time of living in the same place, became a true heart closeness. So much so, that for all four years, I lived with CJ.

And over those years, we got closer and closer, unlikely. It got to the point, February of our senior year, where we realized this is going to end. He was from the Pacific Northwest.

I'm from the Midwest. We both planted back to our home areas. And so we decided a few things.

One is, we took our mattresses off of our bunk beds, and we put them on the floor about a foot apart, so that at night, as we were falling asleep, we could just talk. We just sat there. We just talked about the day.

We talked about the last four years. We talked about our Wheaton College experience. We talked about our family.

We talked about our dreams for the future. We just talked. Just talked.

The last couple weeks, we realized, actually, that it was really going to come to an end. And so we did the thing we never did, which is that we studied together. In part, we never did that, because I studied, he didn't.

While he was inspired to begin studying, two weeks before he was finishing his college career, I do not know, but all of a sudden, CJ would ask me, are you going to study? I'm like, yes, as I have for the last four years. Same carol, same place, same time, every night. He's like, can I come with you? And we would sit there, carol by carol, and we'd study.

We'd talk. Sweet closeness with that dear friend. And yet that, it's like an echo of the incarnational oratory of the closeness that Jesus has with the Father and that Jesus and the Father want to have with us, even in our sinful, human, alienated, raging, isolating, absolutely proud, self-satisfied, self-sufficient condition.

That Jesus has said, I want that closeness with you. What you experience on this earth, when you have perhaps had sweet moments of closeness, is an echo. There is a beautiful reality that the Word became flesh, that He might be close to us.

What does become flesh mean? How do we understand that then? When it sounds like the Word became flesh, it almost sounds if you have kind of a superhero idea in your mind that sort of the Word kind of came in and like transmogrified into some human creature. Like, I don't know, werewolves happen or wolverines or hawks. That's super unhelpful to understand the incarnation.

But I'm gonna guess that some of you think that way. Because that's the only image you have. Like, became flesh.

Now, the way the early church understood this, that they studied this carefully, is they said, no, what happened is that God, fully God, took humanity, including humanity's flesh, including humanity's sinful nature. God took humanity into Himself. He brought humanity to Himself.

And in doing so, He took on not just our human nature and not a kind of pristine, pre-fall, beautiful, pure nature, but that God took on, in Jesus, our sinful nature. Okay, I had to do a lot of reading before I could say that to you. I never wanna say anything new, ever.

Only what the church has taught. And she's taught it. She's taught it in the early church.

She taught it in the medieval church. She taught it in the Reformation church. She taught it in the 19th century church.

Because she understands that if Jesus didn't truly become flesh in all ways with us, we have no one who's come close to us. We have no one who has actually lived with us and become actual flesh with us. He took our sinful nature upon Him, but let's be clear, He was not taken by our sinful nature.

Romans, verse eight, chapter eight, verse three. This is how we know this from the scriptures. It says, the Father sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin.

He condemned sin in the flesh. Okay. Okay, now we try to understand the Bible by the Bible, first and foremost.

So what could that mean? We go to 2 Corinthians, chapter five. So He sent His Son in the likeness of human flesh, including sinful flesh. Now we have Paul saying in chapter five of 2 Corinthians, verse 21, for our sake, for us, He made Him to be sin who knew no sin.

Okay, that isn't one of the verses in the Bible you get to say, I don't understand it. You don't get to say that. You need to understand it.

You need to try and understand it. Why did Paul say that? What is he saying? Jesus became sin so that in Him, excuse me, He became sin who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. What does it mean? It means that the Word became flesh, including taking on our sinful nature, but He was not overtaken by our sinful nature.

It is true in the book of Hebrews teaches as well that Jesus was without sin. And yet it is also true that He took on our sin. Yes, on the cross, which is what we often think about when we talk about our sins being nailed to the cross.

That's accurate. Let's be really, really clear. It wasn't the cross that saved us, brothers and sisters.

It was Jesus' body on the cross. The cross doesn't bleed. You can nail the cross all day long.

It won't affect the cross. No, the nails went into Jesus' body on the cross where He bore our sins. In His body, the cradle catalyzed Jesus taking on our sinful nature.

The cross culminated Jesus taking on our sinful nature. But you need cradle to cross to understand the fullness of the gospel. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Oh, Jesus' death matters deeply to us as Christians. It's the culmination of what He began at the cradle. But His life also matters to us.

His body matters to us. There's no instrumentality that by this we are saved. We're saved in Jesus alone.

His body. His person. His birth.

His death. His resurrection. And you need to understand this.

His ascension where He ascended bodily so that a full human being is in the Godhead. That's the teaching of the church. Sin does not enter the Godhead.

Absolutely not. That's how much the Lord loves you. So you have to understand this.

That's how close He's come. As close as He can. Taking on our sinful nature.

Without Himself sinning. But knowing what we live. Knowing you.

When the cross becomes disconnected from the body of Jesus that took on our sinful nature and the cross becomes disconnected from that, then it becomes this kind of transactional dynamic whereby I need to realize my sins have been nailed to the cross. They're away from me. And now I need to feel better about that.

And I remember feeling a whole lot of, I kind of get it in my head. My sins are away from me. But it wasn't embodied.

It was an instrument. But it wasn't a body. And when we separate those two, we will become very confused about the church, about the body of Jesus.

We'll become very confused about how close Jesus has come. Our salvation comes from outside of us. We're absolutely clear on that.

The verb that's used for that when theologians talk about this is that our salvation is imputed to us. In other words, it comes from outside. The word of imputed is it's applied to us from the love of God the Father who has rescued us from our sinful condition.

There's nothing inside of you, no little divine spark left that can somehow make its way to redemption and salvation. And Jesus helps you there. You're dead in your sin.

You have a full-blown sinful nature. You are utterly and completely, existentially, foundationally lonely. God comes in from outside.

He imputes his love, active love, to you. It is applied to you like this. But the early church also made clear not only is it imputed or applied, this is really important, it's imparted.

It comes into you, into your body. It's imputed from outside. It's imparted.

That's how close he is. That's why I can say with absolute confidence based on the Bible, that if you're in Jesus, you are never without access to actual love, ever. This is why we can teach what Jesus taught and why I taught you last winter to, at times, just to remind you of who you are in Jesus and your identity, to even just put your hand bodily on your chest.

Jesus is in the Father. I am in him. And he is in me.

And yet he's overcome our sinful nature. He's come close and yet there's absolute victory that we could never win ourselves. How can we understand that? How can we understand that we're sin, we have darkness, Jesus comes in, it's like we need an image to understand something like that.

Which is exactly what John gave us in verse 5 that we studied last week together. The way to understand that he's become flesh and dwelt among us is to understand that the light, verse 5, chapter 1, shines in the

darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Jesus is light from light, the Creed says.

He's uncreated light. Light was created by the word, by the Father, that we experience, that's created light. This is uncreated light, it's always been and that light is shown in the darkness of our bodies, of our sinful nature, of our minds.

It's come into the darkness, it's fully engaged the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it because what happens, very, very simply, when you're in a very dark room and a light shines, it's no longer dark. That's all it takes. That's all it takes.

Here's a story about light shining in the darkness. Catherine and I, some of you have heard this story, we were in a northern city in Brazil where Catherine grew up, a city called Salvador, which means salvation, savior. And in that city we became friends with a transgendered prostitute.

We met him in the city square, we struck up a conversation, Enrique was his name and he got to know us, somebody got to know him and we had a chance to share that Jesus came in a body and the reality of the body was very important to Enrique. He was trying to change his body and he heard that Jesus came in a body and that he came among us and Enrique just soaked it up. I mean, I shared this with folks from where I was from, the Midwest and suburbans, suburbanites and I'd rarely seen anybody take it in like Enrique took it in.

He just absorbed it, he believed it, he believed Jesus was the word, he believed he came in the flesh, he believed he dwelt among us and he came back to us a day later and he said, would you come and bring the same Jesus to my coworkers? We live in an abandoned building, we squat there, other prostitutes in different forms of being transgendered, would you come and bring this to us? And Kath and I paused, the guidebooks say you're never to leave the main streets of this city and I realized we're going to go into a place that people who wrote those guidebooks had never even imagined existed. We said, okay, we'll go. So we wound our way down to this abandoned building, the sun was setting, it was getting darker and darker.

We walked to the building up these stairs and the minute you walked in you were just sort of hit with the smell of human sweat, waste, I'd never been so afraid in my life. We walked up the stairs, he was taking us to a room where four or five of his coworkers, his friends, his roommates had gathered to hear about Jesus. As we're getting ready to go in the door, the sun had set and then all the lights inside this building went out and it was completely dark and I said to Katharine in that moment, speaking in English, which our friends didn't understand, I just said, okay, now I'm afraid.

She said without skipping a conversational beat, Jesus is here. When the prostitutes came through the door with a Bic lighter, lit it and it wasn't dark anymore. Some generator kicked in somewhere and the lights went on.

That's all it took, just that light. That's all it took was the proclamation, Jesus is here. The light has shown in the darkness of our sinful, lonely nature and the darkness cannot, will not, will never overcome it and dwelt among us.

Let's look at that. This is the foundational truth that I'm teaching but if it's true that God has come close to us in Jesus, then we must be able to get it. We must be able to think about it and we must be able to experience and we must be able to apprehend it.

There's a way in which God's love come close, comes also concrete. The word dwell there is actually a phrase. It's not actually one word in the original language and the phrase is, and he pitched his tent among us.

Okay, the same way that John was reflecting on Genesis last week, Genesis 1 in the beginning, now he's reflecting on Exodus. He's working out of the first five books of the Old Testament called the Torah and in this case, he's working out of Exodus and he's saying, when God wanted to show himself to the people of God, prior to the historical incarnation of Jesus as Lord, he showed himself through a tent of meeting. He showed himself by having a tent where the presence of God dwelled, where there would be fire and smoke and there would be cloud.

People would go into the tent and they would meet with God as somebody would meet with God face to face. Closeness, concreteness. God was giving this testimony to the people of Israel that is fulfilled ultimately in Jesus but it was already happening through the tent of meeting.

It was already happening through all these concrete ways in which God met the people of Israel. He did not say to the people of Israel, go out in the desert and think about me. Just think about me.

No. He gave them a tent of meeting. He gave them a tabernacle.

He gave them a temple. The word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. I wish someone had taught me this earlier.

I just wish I'd known this. I wish I'd known that God came concretely. See, I was raised being told that God loves me and I had no reason not to believe it, so I believed it.

I was raised understanding that the cross freed me from my sin, so I tried really hard to believe that but I got to tell you, it was my mid-twenties where I finally began to understand that He came concretely. He came through an incarnational understanding. He came through what we call here a sacramental worldview.

What does that mean? Well, sacramental worldview is primarily John 1 14. The sacramental worldview, a sacrament is, Augustine called a sacrament an outward invisible sign of an inward invisible grace. It's an outward visible sign of an inward invisible grace.

It's a gift given that has an outward manifestation. That's a sacrament. As I've said it in greater shorthand, matter matters.

Matter matters because God wants to come close and communicate His love incarnationally. This is the foundation of why we care so deeply about the sacraments. It's not because it's Res's thing or that kind of somehow gives us a unique market share among Wheaton College students.

Ah, heaven forbid. It's like this is our niche thing that we do. No, no, this is the gospel.

It matters that He came incarnationally. Oh, it matters that He came in the crucifixion and the resurrection, but it matters that He came incarnationally. It's why we rehearse it every single week.

He came in His body. He came close. He came concretely, which means we can get this.

We can live this. We can know this. I had so much loneliness until I understood this.

I still have loneliness at times. I'm not utterly cured of my loneliness. It's so much better that I really began to understand the incarnation.

Now, the incarnation manifests itself primarily in Jesus. Primarily, this is why we believe in sacramental worldview and the incarnation of Jesus. And in the church, His body is secondarily why it's so important.

That's the major sacramental understanding is the church. Holy Communion, baptism are very important. They're chief sacraments, but you have to start with Jesus.

You have to go to the church and then you go to Holy Communion and baptism to understand that. But the foundation is broader and bigger and they manifest what we understand here, that Jesus' close love is concrete to you. There are two other ways, and there's several ways, but I want to just highlight two ways at resurrection, how we seek to live the incarnation of God.

Besides Holy Communion and baptism, other really important ways, two other ways here in our church. The first is the arts. The second is the laying on of hands.

It is very important to understand the arts in light of the incarnation, Jesus dwelling among us. The arts are not decorative. They are declarative.

They are not finery on the core of the gospel. They are declarative of the gospel itself. They minister to us.

They proclaim. They preach that God has come close to forgive us our sins and free us from our loneliness and alienation. The arts are critical to walking in the gospel, to living in Jesus.

Hear this quote from Dr. John Walford, an art historian. He says this, The arts are part of God's provision for our human well-being. The more the arts are absent from our lives, the more we are alienated from the fullness of life as provided by God.

Loneliness. Alienation. Without the arts that tell the great story.

Not any art. We spend way too much time on tawdry art. We give way too much time to ridiculous, sinful, filmmaking, television-making.

They're not intrinsically wrong. But so much of it's garbage that doesn't tell the great story. And it has power because it's art.

Believe me, art always declares. The question is, is it declaring the gospel, the great story, that Jesus is at the heart of the Father and He's come to become flesh? That may be explicitly Christian. It may be implicitly Christian.

You need to learn to discern that. But what you really need to learn to discern is stop putting garbage in front of you that doesn't tell the story. Stop receiving the declaration of the world that says that you matter in yourself without an invasion from God.

It makes receiving the construct and the constructions and the concrete realities of God even harder. Because to engage the true story in beautiful song, beautiful visual art, beautiful storytelling, novel, poetry, filmmaking, oh, dance. I sat here.

I sat right there. And it was an Easter vigil. And we were artistically telling the story of Jesus' come, the history of salvation.

And I sat here. And the story was told at the beginning of all time when God created the heavens and the earth. And the story was told when God created Adam and Eve.

And Adam and Eve came out just wonderful young man, wonderful young woman. And they came and they danced and they connected and they told the story through word, through dance, through movement, through visual. They told the story that God has created man and that man was created very good.

And it was a beautiful story of male and female. And I sat there and I realized Adam really existed. Eve really existed.

And they loved each other. It wasn't politicized. There wasn't rage between them.

There wasn't deep suspicion. They were together. And I was ministered to that it was true.

And then a depiction of the fall came in. And Adam and Eve who had been together were now becoming more and more alienated. And it reached this pitch where all of a sudden the altar itself broke in two.

And it was broken and the communion was gone. And then I just felt that loneliness, that alienation in a way that I couldn't have just perhaps reading. It was real.

Until the end came. And I as a symbol of the church had the role of going to Adam and Eve who were out here. And I brought them to a rebuilt table.

It's true. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory.

One of the very first times I ever truly knew after years of saying God love me, that God loved me was when a person about five years ahead of me here at Resurrection I was just come to res. I was in such a state of acute loneliness, rage, anxiety, bitterness, cynicism. I was just compressed.

And this older brother in the Lord asked if he could pray for me. And I said sure. We met in the chapel of the old church.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I'd never had anybody pray for me like that. I didn't know that it was in the Bible it was called the laying on of hands.

It was all very appropriate. As a laying on of hands must always be. We ask permission to put our hand if we don't know somebody.

Because human beings desperately need touch. Oh I know touch can be abused. I understand that.

That's the devil who hates the body. But touch is also very needed. Godly.

And his hand was placed to my shoulder and I just sat there and he began to pray for me. He was listening to God on my behalf. He prayed beautiful prayers personal prayers.

Prayers about my past and my history that he didn't know that showed me that God knew me. Prayers about the ramifications of my parents divorce that were haunting me that he didn't understand but that God knew. It was concrete.

It was the actual love of God. The laying on of hands. The arts.

Holy communion. Baptism. The church.

Because Jesus has become fully man you are never without access to actual love. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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