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THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD

Let me begin this morning by describing three situations with which, I suspect all of us can in some way identify.

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First is your relationship with the most difficult member of your family.

- You've probably spent some time in stores or on-line trying to find presents for your family and friends, but for this one person, you have no idea what to give.
    - And it probably bothers you because deep down you feel that your inability to know what to give is symbolic of your lifelong confusion about how to make this challenging relationship work.
  - So, in the end you spend more than you meant to spend on something you don't really believe s/he wants.
  - You've thrown money at the problem, but inwardly shamed yourself because you know that what you're buying isn't the answer.
    - And when the gift is opened, there will be a half-hearted smile that says you've failed again to do something that might overcome the chasm between you.
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Here's the second scenario.

- Your family or friends are coming to town for Christmas.
    - You want everything to be perfect for them so you exchange a flurry of emails or phone calls about who's going to sleep where, and whether the dog is going to be a problem.
    - You go through a frenzy of shopping and baking and cooking, all the while worrying that you will forget something.
      - Your kitchen becomes your empire and anyone who dares to interrupt you will be the recipient of that look from you.
      - You worry so much about the gravy or reheating the carrots, or cutting the meat just the right thickness that when they say goodbye, they can't help but comment that it's a shame you really didn't get to talk while they were here.
        - And once they've finally left, you collapse in a heap, perhaps even with some tears of exhaustion.
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Third situation:

- You feel there's something missing or you actually have an empty feeling as you join in the cozy Christmas with family and friends,
    - yet your heart is breaking for the people having a tough time with the cold, or in isolation, or in poverty, or in grief.
      - So, you gather together presents for the children of prisoners, or turn all your Christmas gifts into vouchers representing your support of a cow or a goat or six chickens for people who need these resources more than you and your friends need those gifts.
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What do all these scenes have in common?

- Let me suggest that they're all based on one tiny word: FOR.

- When we care about those for whom Christmas is a tough time, we want to do something FOR them.
- We want our houseguests to enjoy their Christmas visit, so we spend all our time doing things FOR them, like cooking dinner, or cleaning things up, or arranging activities to entertain them.
- When we feel our relationship with someone in the family is faltering, our instinct is to do something FOR that person that might somehow melt the heart and restore the relationship.
  - And these gestures of FOR matter because they sum up a whole life in which we try to make relationships better, try to make the world better, try to be better people ourselves by doing things FOR people.

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It seems that the word that exemplifies being an admirable person, the word that sums up the spirit of Christmas is FOR.

- We cook FOR; we buy presents FOR; we offer charity FOR, all to say that we will sacrifice all by doing FOR others.

But something is wrong here.

- All these gestures are generous, warm-hearted, admirable actions.
  - Yet somehow, they don't go to the heart of the problem.
    - You give that estranged family member a gift, but the division still exists between you.
    - You wear yourself out in showing hospitality, but you never actually have a conversation with your loved one.
    - You make fine acts of charity, but the poor are still strangers to you.

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FOR is a fine word, but it doesn't dismantle resentment; it doesn't overcome misunderstanding; it doesn't deal with alienation; it doesn't bring an end to isolation.

- Most of all, FOR isn't the way that GOD celebrates Christmas.
  - GOD doesn't set the world right at Christmas.
  - GOD doesn't mount up blessings upon us and then get miserable when we open them up and fail to be sufficiently excited or touched or grateful.
    - FOR isn't what GOD shows us at Christmas.

In some ways, we wish it was.

- We'd love GOD to make everything happy and surround us with perfect things.
  - When we get upset with GOD, it's easy to feel GOD isn't keeping up the divine side of our mutual relationship—to do things FOR us, now and forever.

Instead, GOD shows us something else at Christmas.

- GOD speak a rather different word.
  - The angel says to Joseph, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a SON, they shall name Him EMMANUEL, which means, "GOD WITH us."<sup>1</sup>
  - And then in John's version of the Christmas story that we heard this morning, we get the summary statement of what Christmas means: "The WORD became flesh and made HIS dwelling among us."<sup>2</sup> >>>WITH us.
    - It's a simple little word, but it lies at the heart of Christmas and at the heart of the Christian faith.>>>WITH.

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Think back to the beginning of creation.

- John reminds us that, "the WORD was WITH GOD. HE was in the beginning WITH GOD...without HIM nothing was made that was made."<sup>3</sup>

- In other words, before anything else, there was a WITH:
  - the WITH between the CREATOR and the WORD, or as we've come to describe it, between the FATHER and the SON.
    - WITH is the most fundamental thing about GOD.
    - Christmas is about GOD choosing to be WITH us.
    - And the very last words of JESUS before HE returned to be WITH the FATHER are, "Behold, I am WITH you always.
      - What JESUS is saying is, "There will never be a time when I am not WITH you."
  - Even Revelation describes the final disclosure of GOD'S eternal reign by saying, "See, the home of GOD is among—WITH—mortals."
    - "HE will dwell WITH them as their GOD; they will be HIS people, and GOD HIMSELF will be WITH them."

What we've discovered then. is the most important word in the Bible—the word that describes the heart of GOD and the very nature of GOD'S purpose.

- That word is WITH.
    - That's what GOD was in the very beginning.
    - That's what GOD sought to instill in the creation of all things.
    - That's what GOD was looking for in making the covenant with Israel.
    - That's what GOD coming among us in JESUS was all about.
    - That's what the sending of the HOLY SPIRIT is.
    - That's what eternity in the company of GOD will look like.
      - It's all in that little word WITH.
        - GOD'S whole existence and action and purpose are centered on being WITH us.
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In a lot of ways, WITH is harder than FOR.

- You can do FOR without a conversation, without a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of your life to accommodate and incorporate the other.
  - The reason your Christmas gift for your emotionally distant family member is doomed is not because FOR is wrong,
  - not because there is anything bad about generosity.
    - It's because the only real solution for you and that family member is to be WITH each other long enough to hear each other's stories and work out the countless misunderstandings and hurts that have defined your relationship beyond the point of being rescued by the right Christmas present.
  - The reason you collapse in tears when your guests have gone home is because the hard work is finding out how you can share the different responsibilities of kitchen and elsewhere,
  - and genuinely be WITH one another in ways that make a stay of several nights the joy of WITH rather than the burden of FOR.
- What makes attempts at Christmas charity seem hollow is not that they're not genuine and helpful and kind,
- but that what isolated and grieving and impoverished people usually need is not gifts or money.
  - Rather it is the faithful presence of someone who really cares about them and wants to be WITH them as a unique and valuable people.
    - It is the WITH they desperately want, and the FOR, on its own (whether food, presents, or money) cannot make up for the lack of that WITH.

Yet we all fear the WITH, because WITH seems to ask more of us than we can give.

- We'd all prefer to keep charity on the level of FOR, where it can't hurt us.
- We all know that more families struggle over Christmas than at any other time of the year.
  - And it's fairly easy to do FOR people in these situations.
  - Unfortunately, it's not until there's nothing else to do but be WITH one another that you realize that being WITH is harder than doing FOR.
  - Honestly, the truth is that sometimes, it's just too hard.

And that's why it's glorious, almost incredible Good News that GOD didn't settle on FOR.

- At Christmas, GOD said clearly, "I am WITH you. Behold, MY dwelling is among you. I've moved into the neighborhood. I will be WITH you always. My name is EMMANUEL—GOD WITH us."
  - Certainly, there is an element of FOR in JESUS life.
    - HE was FOR us when HE healed and taught.
    - HE was FOR us when HE died on the cross.
    - HE was FOR us when HE rose from the grave and ascended to heaven.
      - These are things that only GOD could do.
      - But the power of these things GOD did FOR us lies in that they were done based on GOD being WITH us.
  - GOD has not abolished FOR.
    - But GOD, at Christmas, in becoming flesh in JESUS, has said that there will never again be a FOR that is not based on a fundamental, unalterable, everlasting, and utterly unwavering WITH.
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So how do we celebrate this Good News?

- By being WITH people in poverty and distress even when there is nothing else we can FOR them.
- By being WITH people in grief and sadness and loss even when there is nothing else to say.
- By being WITH and listening to and walking WITH those we find most difficult rather than trying to buy them off with a gift or face-saving gesture.
- By being still WITH GOD in silent prayer rather than rushing around in our anxiety to do even more things FOR GOD.
- By taking an appraisal of all our relationships and asking ourselves, "Does my doing FOR arise out a fundamental commitment to be WITH, or is my drive for doing FOR motivated by my profound desire to avoid the discomfort, the challenge, the patience, the loss of control involved in being WITH?"

No one could be more tempted to retreat into doing FOR than GOD.

- GOD, above all, knows how exasperating, ungrateful, thoughtless, and self-destructive company we can be.
  - Most of the time we just want GOD to fix things and spare us the effort of the relationship.

But that's not GOD'S way.

- GOD could have done it all alone.
  - But GOD chose not to.
  - GOD chose to do it WITH us.
    - Even though it cost the cross, GOD chose to be WITH us.
- That is the wonder and the glory of Christmas.
  - WITH is the most important word.
    - That is the Good News of Christmas.