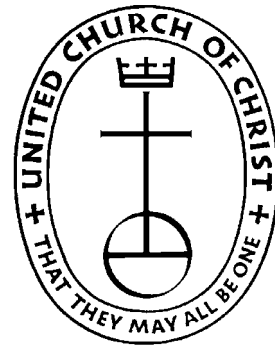


# Christmas Stories

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
and  
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December 20, 2009



The ministers retell stories of love and generosity for Christmas.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
December 20, 2009 (#1385)  
A Christmas Story

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

## God Is Love – A Christmas Story

Many years ago, Professor John Powell, a Jesuit priest, watched students file into the classroom for the first session of a course called Theology of Faith at Loyola University in Chicago.

That was when he saw Tommy, combing long flaxen hair which hung six inches below his shoulders. Even though he knew better, Father Powell found himself filing Tommy under “S” for strange.

Tommy turned out to be the “atheist in residence” in that course – constantly objecting to, smirking at or whining about the possibility of an unconditionally loving God. When Tommy came up at the end of the course to turn in his final exam, he asked in a lightly cynical tone: “Do you think I’ll ever find God?”

Powell decided on a little shock therapy. “No!” he said emphatically. “Oh,” Tommy responded, “I thought that was the product you were pushing.” Father Powell let him get five steps from the classroom door and then called out: “Tommy! I don’t think you’ll ever find God, but I am certain God will find you!”

Tommy shrugged and left the class. Father Powell was slightly disappointed that Tommy didn’t acknowledge his clever line: “God will find you!”

Not long after Tommy’s graduation, Professor Powell heard that Tommy had terminal cancer. Tommy came back to the university to see Powell. His body at that point was badly wasted and the long hair had fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice firm.

Powell said, “Tommy, I’ve thought about you often. I hear you are sick!”

“Yes, very sick. I have cancer in both lungs. It’s a matter of weeks.”

“Can you talk about it, Tom?”

“What would you like to know?”

“What’s it like to be only twenty-four and dying?”

“Well, it could be worse.”

“How?”

“Well, like being fifty and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making money are the real ‘biggies’ in life.”

“But what I came to see you about,” Tom said, “is something you said to me on the last day of class.” (He remembered!) He continued, “I asked you if you thought I would ever find God and you said, ‘No, but God will find you!’”

He said, “I thought about that a lot, even though my search for God was hardly intense at that time. But when doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant, I got serious about locating God. When the malignancy spread into my vital organs, I began banging bloody fists against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out. In fact, nothing happened.”

He went on, “Did you ever try anything for a long time with great effort and no success? You get fed up with trying and you quit. Well, one day I woke up, and instead of throwing more futile appeals over that high brick wall to a God who may be or may not be there, I just quit. I decided that I didn’t really care about God or an afterlife. I wanted to spend the time I had left doing something more profitable.”

He said to the Professor, “I thought about you and I remembered something else you had said: ‘The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. But it would be equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.’”

“So,” he said, “I began with the hardest one: my Dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. ‘Dad’ ... ‘Yes, what?’ he asked without lowering the paper. ... ‘Dad, I want to talk with you.’ ‘Well, talk.’ ‘I mean. It’s really important.’”

“The newspaper came down three slow inches. ‘What is it?’ ‘Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that.’”

Tom smiled at Father Powell and said with obvious satisfaction, as though a warm joy flowed inside him: “The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. And we talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning. It felt so good to be close to my father, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me.”

Tom said, "It was easier with my mother and little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other. We shared things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was only sorry I had waited so long to open up to all the people I had actually been close to."

"Then, one day I turned around and God was there. God didn't come to me when I pleaded. But the important thing is that God was there. God found me. You were right. God found me even after I stopped looking for God."

"Tommy," Father Powell said, "I think you are saying that the surest way to find God is not to make God a private possession, a problem solver or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather to simply open up to love." Then Father Powell quoted from that powerful passage in I John, the affirmation by one of the early Christian churches that, "No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us ... God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God and God in them."

Professor Powell asked Tom if he could return in a few days to share those insights with Powell's class, but sadly he didn't live that long.

If the biblical birth narratives are stories created by the early churches to give life to Jesus' message and to represent what made him special, they could have chosen to do that in so many other ways. They could have put his birth in the context of something spectacularly otherworldly and supernatural, or they could have put his birth in the context of riches and great power.

But instead the birth stories are about a humble setting with poor and outcast folks greeting a newborn child with love.

And perhaps that is why, according to tradition, the last Advent candle, the one lighted on the Sunday closest to Christmas, is the Candle of Love. The whole notion of God remains a mystery for me, but in faith I do affirm that God is indeed love, and that if we dwell in love, somehow God dwells in us.

#### PRAYER

Mystery of all mysteries, ground of our very being, spirit of love and acceptance, we rejoice this day in the love that came alive in the life of Jesus, that peasant sage of long ago. We are grateful that through his life, we know that your love, expressed in metaphor because we have no other way, holds each of us in its embrace, that we are accepted as we are and then we are offered the opportunity to accept others as they are. Amen.

Libby Tigner read the story “Ding-a-ling-ling” by Kaaren Solveig Anderson from her book of meditations, *Glad to Be Human*. You can read the story online at <http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/meditationsand/submissions/5050.shtml>.

Libby concluded with the following prayer:

O Holy One, the God who is the mystery of life, the mystery of love, and the ground of our being, we give you our thanks for this holy and magical season of hope and joy. We are eager for your love to be reborn in us this Christmas season. May our eyes be newly opened to the signs of your grace that surround us everyday – laughter of children, music in the air, a helping hand. May our frustrations with ourselves and others be eased in this season of love, so that we might be a little more forgiving, a little more understanding, a little more patient with ourselves and those whom we encounter in our daily rounds. May our humdrum spirits be transformed into spirits of generosity, as we say thank you. Thank you for our lives. Thank you for your love. Thank you for all of the gifts of being. This Christmas, and always, we are your people, called in your love. May we live in these truths. Amen.