

The Most Dangerous Words

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Date: 22 December 2024

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[0 : 00] So I'll start with a question just to think about what's something that you've given up to help someone else? Something that you've given up to help someone else?

Everyone knows I'm a Midwesterner. I hail from Indiana. Everyone knows that no one takes the last piece of pizza because you're hoping that like someone else will take it and you wouldn't dare take it, right?

You don't give up the last piece of pizza. You don't give up the last cookie. You don't take the last cookie. You give it up so someone else can have it. And then there are like more serious things, right? Like the loan to a family member that you know you're never going to get that money back. Or when you're sick and you move to the guest bed because you don't want to keep your partner up with your snoring. Purely theoretical example. Those folks are truly the angels among us, right? When we give something up to help someone else, we want to make a difference. We want to be helpful. We want to be kind. We want to know that our choices, our decisions, what we do matters. And I also know that there are times that many of us can feel powerless against the sheer umph, the sheer power of the world's big problems and the powers that keep those problems going.

[1 : 16] So this morning we're talking about the core of the Christmas story and that's love. And I know that the power of love can sort of feel like bringing a balloon sword to a sword fight, to a duel.

Anybody know the website TV Tropes? Anybody know this website? Yes! I knew it'd be you, Nathan. I knew it'd be you. So TV Tropes is a website that sort of keeps track, like Wikipedia style, of every possible plot device, cliché trope that can be used, not just in TV but any media. And so they have an entry on the power of love. You can put up the screenshot. I'll read it for you. It starts with a quote. It says, Love is a very powerful force, even more so when it's focused into a coherent beam of destruction.

The power of love, and every one of those blue things on the screen is a link to a different trope. The power of love is a curious thing. It makes one man weep and another man sing. It can change a hawk to a little white dove.

It can bring inanimate objects to life. It might just save your life. It makes people want to give up personal freedom to belong to each other. Don't you dare mock it. It's more than a feeling. That's the power of love.

[2 : 24] Even more than the power of friendship and the power of family, the power of love can be applied in dire situations to make things better. In fact, in many Disney movies, it's the solution to everything.

It's also occasionally a useful *deus ex machina*. Common applications of the power of love, including activating an empathetic weapon, freeing a loved one from mind control, strengthening a loved one, and converting a real death into a Disney death.

Even when the power of love is not literally and directly responsible, the scene is often set such that the audience has left the impression that it was really responsible. And although love is more powerful than magic, as it usually helps break spells.

Don't you dare pity me can sometimes be overcome by the power of love. However, it may take time, and the love itself must be purified of any pity it does contain. Roll the clip. Now, the first Christmas shows us that love, others-oriented, self-sacrificial love, is in fact what can change the world.

So we're going to start with Joseph in Matthew chapter 1. If you have a Bible or a phone or a device, the words will also be on the screen. This is the Gospel of Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 through 25.

[3 : 44] And this is what the Gospel writer says. This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly. So he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel or a messenger of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

Joseph, son of David, the angel said, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

And all of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet Isaiah. Look, the virgin will conceive a child. She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

And when Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife, and Joseph named him Jesus. So in our scripture reading, Joseph wakes up to this devastating news.

[5 : 00] His betrothed, his fiancée, is pregnant and not by him. Now, in a morally conservative culture 2,000 years ago, that is particularly bad news, because the primary currency of that culture is honor and shame.

It was the main thing that you traded in, even more than money, even more than currency, it was honor and shame. And so for Joseph to be associated with Mary, who was pregnant by mysterious means, would be a source of shame and a way to lose honor.

And so Joseph has two or three paths that he could take. He could take the truly awful path and disgrace Mary publicly and try to sort of sue for her physical punishment.

That doesn't really seem to be an option for him. He could take the sort of protect himself route to divorce her quietly. And this is safe. It's respectable. According to the scriptures, he would be even considered righteous, at least in the sort of minimal sense of don't be a jerk.

This is sort of lowest common denominator, don't be a jerk behavior. Or, as the angel encourages him, he can protect Mary to stay, to adopt the son of Mary, Jesus, as his own, and then lose the honor and face the shame of the community that's going to happen if he does this.

[6 : 18] It's dangerous. It's costly. And it's the other meaning of the Greek word diakosune, righteous. It's not just righteous. It's just.

It creates a better world. And Joseph chooses to give up everything that mattered to his culture, his honor, his reputation, his respect, to protect someone vulnerable, a young woman who claims that she's about to have a baby through the power of God.

And that choice, that self-sacrificing, others-oriented love, helps change the world. And what I love about the story of Joseph, and this is like a theme in the birth narratives of Jesus, happens in Matthew 1, happens in Luke 1, where Joseph, like, does the right thing and then eventually sort of disappears, fades from the story.

He's not the hero. He doesn't make himself the main character. His choice is to do right by his fiancée, give up his own honor, take on shame, and then basically disappear from the story.

Same thing happens with Zachariah, right? He doesn't believe that his wife Elizabeth is going to be pregnant, and so the angel's like, why don't you just be quiet for nine months? Now, Joseph's actions are a small example of the much larger thing happening in the Christmas story.

[7 : 39] And that's what God is doing in the person of Jesus. Christians historically have believed that when Jesus was coming into the world, it was some way that God, God's self, was coming into the world, taking on flesh, as the Gospel of John says, and living or tabernacling or moving into the neighborhood.

This is how one ancient Christian writer puts it in Philippians 2, St. Paul says, let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, assuming human likeness, and being found in appearance as human, he humbled himself.

Now, Philippians 2 is usually translated, go to the next slide, though, this contrasted, have the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

It's this contrast. He was God, but even though he was God, he did this thing. He took on flesh. He became human. But that though, not yet, not yet, that though is a, it's a translation decision. It's not, the word though is not there in the Greek language that the New Testament was written in. A translator asked to decide what the relationship is between these two sentences. Let the same mind be in you that it was in Christ Jesus who existed in the form of God.

[9 : 14] Is that a though? Or, modern translators have changed the way that they've translated this to because. Because he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

And there's a difference here. Because one is making the claim, although God was God, God did something so radical, so extraordinary, so self-sacrificial that he took on flesh and became a human.

But what if the statement was not a although statement, but because he existed in the form of God, because of God's character, because of the way that God is like, God acted perfectly within their character and humbled themselves.

God had all of the power in the universe. And because God is like that, God chose to become tiny and weak for us.

And this makes sense of Jesus' life. When you look at Jesus' life, you assume this is what God would do if God would show up in the world. Jesus who aligned himself with the interests of the poor, who always moved towards those who were pushed to the edges of society.

[10 : 23] Jesus who routinely gave up his own honor to lift up others, to reduce their shame, and to empower them. So I think our invitation today is figuring out where are the places that we have power?

Where are the places that we have privilege? Because every single one of us, everybody in this room, from the smallest child over there to the oldest or the richest among us, every single one of us has some amount to offer to someone else, to our neighbor, and even to our enemies, as Jesus would say.

Every single one of us has a way that we can use love, self-sacrificing, others-oriented love to lift somebody else up. We all have some amount of time or comfort or resources or power or pride that we can set aside so that someone else can live.

And for those of us who sit among the more privileged identities, we have the power to leverage those privileges for the sake of others.

And for those of us who may have identities that get pushed to the edges, pushed to the margins, that lose power in some way, we too get to be able to claim dignity and to use that dignity in order to help someone else.

[11 : 48] Because I thoroughly believe that the world gets worse if we just decide to hoard our power and our resources. And we all want to believe that we're the exception. We all want to believe that, yes, the world gets worse when everybody hoards their power and resources.

Not me, though. The most deceptive and potentially destructive words in the world are I deserve. And they're deceptive because they start from a place of truth.

We do deserve a lot. We deserve dignity and honor and worth and safety. But then it can be twisted. I deserve two-day shipping. I deserve the latest technology.

I deserve fewer taxes. I deserve to live in a society where I don't have to learn a second language to get around. I deserve to not use my turn signal. That's how society falls apart.

If you hoard an I-deserve mentality, when you have just a little bit of power, it becomes exponentially harder when you have a lot of power.

[12 : 56] The billionaires taking charge of our government and society, they never practiced saying no to I-deserve. Forgoing power and privilege, it doesn't get easier when you get more power and privilege.

It quickly mutates into I-exploit. There is risk in this kind of love. Bell Hooks said it well. The practice of love offers no place of safety.

We risk loss and hurt and pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside of our control. But I also know that the alternative to that risk is far worse.

The illusion of safety and protection by refusing to offer self-sacrificing love will lead to a world of pain. The world gets worse when we hoard our power.

But God, the source of all might and power and authority, because God was God, because God will always enact in a manner that makes sense with who God is, God did not exploit.

[14 : 01] God did not use I-deserve to keep themselves far above us, but rather chose to become human. So when we share our power, when we leverage it for the sake of others, everyone's lives get better, including ours, because we aren't tempted to be corrupted and mutated by the forces of hoarding.

Jewish mystics have an idea of zim-zum, that the world was created by God withdrawing a bit of himself to make room for the world. And by the withdrawal of God's power, the world was then created, which then created the cycle of love.

And so, when we share, when we leverage our power, when we withdraw just a little bit of our deserve mentality, then there's only more opportunities for love. And we find the meaning that we're looking for.

Christmas is a time when we remember where God's love came down, where God's love took on flesh. We believe in the kind of God whose character is one that's others-oriented and self-sacrificing, and an example worth imitating.

Love means giving something up, making space for others so that all of us can enjoy peace. And the invitation is to join in God's way of love.