

1 John 3:1 **Children's Christmas Service**

Christmas changes you. Maybe not in the way you think, though. Not just in its demands on your schedule. Not only the hit it takes on your wallet. Not the impact it takes on your health after demolishing your diet. No, Christmas changes you in a more profound, like-altering kind of way.

Today's service is constructed around the theme: "See What Great Love." That theme comes from this verse in 1 John 3:1 "**See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!**" That verse sounds, well, nice. It fills our hearts with warmth. But that basic premise of giving careful attention to the lavish love of God challenges us. It requires us to rethink our lives. We need to reconsider our basic identities.

There is a phrase that has recently crept into our vocabulary: 'I identify as...' Setting aside what usually follows, we see a problematic starting place for how we see ourselves.

Here's what I mean. You spend years and immeasurable amounts of energy trying to make a clean break from your family, how you were raised, how you were treated, where you grew up. Or you are constantly trying to get back to where you came from, the heritage you cherish, the name that carries respect back home, preferring not to be known for where you are now and what you are doing in the present. You are struggling through school and slogging through the levels, but you want people to know eventually they will recognize you as the next Steve Jobs, the next Einstein, the next Stephen Strasbourg, the next LeBron James, the next world-famous YouTuber. You want to be recognized as a compassionate and caring friend, someone who takes the times to carefully consider the the most meaningful gifts everyone in your life could really use and actually wants. You pour all your waking moments into the people in your home, wanting to be seen for the impact you make on your loved ones, their growth and development, their accomplishments and the way they treat people. You put up with a lot of garbage in your daily life and keep your mouth shut and just do what you are told without complaining just so the people who count on you can know for certain that you are dependable.

Whatever you want to be, whatever you wish you could become, it's really about control. All of us do it. Naturally, we want to be in charge of our own identity.

What would you do if you were the victim of a case of mistaken identity? That actually happened to Chris Long of Reno, Nevada. He had a bone marrow transplant as part of his treatment for Leukemia. Three months later blood samples taken from his own body showed the DNA of his donor, a younger man who lived 5,000 miles away in Germany. He was still the same person. But his DNA said he was someone else.

Christmas causes us to confront the conflict between who we think we should be and what God declares us to be in Jesus. 1 John 3:1 starts "**See what great love the Father has lavished on us.**" Here "see" means stop what you are doing. Drop everything and pay

attention to this one fact. And that one fact is God's unique, one-of-a-kind love. This species of love has nothing to do with giving you your best life. This variety of love isn't based on how well it helps you achieve your heart's-designed vision for self fulfillment. That would be ok, wish-list-fulfilling love. This is different. "What glorious, sublime love," as Martin Luther once remarked.

God's glorious, sublime love is best seen at Christmas. The birth of Jesus puts flesh on the Father's mind-blowing love that is completely focused on what you need rather than just what you want or hope to get. It is formulated and built to match your heart's exact specifications.

And that requires first of all giving up your identity. Not that your dreams and hopes are wrong. It's just that having all your best dreams come true still won't get you to where God needs you to be. In that way Christmas is a punch in the gut to get your attention that your best vision for yourself still falls far short of what God actually wants for you. So God has to step in. God had to act. God had to get to work.

Christmas says God's Son, Jesus, had to come to this earth to be what you and I could never be on our own. The baby placed in that crude feeding trough is good news that God doesn't give up on you. Instead, he sees you as worthy of taking the most extreme measures. God doesn't want to tweak your plans or reform your ambitions. The love of the Father moved heaven and earth to make you fit his ultimate design for you. Because that baby in Bethlehem grew up to live flawlessly according to God's commands, you are given a clean record without any misconduct or wrongdoing before God. Because Jesus died innocently at the end of his young life, all the things that you aren't proud of, all the things that cause you to be ashamed, all the things that make you wish you were someone else, all your sins are eliminated by the sacrifice of Jesus. Gone. Because of God's gloriously sublime love in Jesus, you are adopted into your Father's family and declared to be his own perfect child. You are assigned all the infinite riches coming from your heavenly inheritance as a child of God.

See what great love! Stand in awe of the Christmas the love of God that gives your life a God-declared purpose and direction for life. Marvel at the gifts filling and overflowing your life with love today. And so it's not just the children in the front of church today. We all burst forth in worship at that love of God that makes us his children. That is what we are! Amen.