

A Christmas Story

Once upon a time there lived a king who loved a poor maiden. The king was all-powerful in his land and no one would dare to prevent his marriage to whomever he pleased, despite differences in class. But the maiden did not know the king or suspect his love for her.

The king's love became a peculiar sort of tragedy. Because he desired the maiden and her true love and understanding, he could not approach his beloved as the king. For if he were to appear to the maiden as a king, she would be awed by the differences between them. She could worship and admire him for his power and status, but she could not forget that he was the king and that she was but a humble maiden. As a true lover, the king desired not to be glorified by the maiden but to glorify her. He desired her true understanding and equality in love and he knew true love could come only through his beloved's freedom, courage and self-confidence. These all-important attributes of love would not blossom in the unequal relationship of king and subject. The differences between the king and the maiden would prevent either from being confident, understanding or happy in their love.

The king considered the possibility of elevating the maiden to his equal through secret gifts, transfiguring her to the joys of being a princess. But he quickly realized the folly of this approach. If the maiden accepted her good fortune, their love would be only a delusion created by the king. And, if the maiden were not completely deluded, in her heart she would suspect the deception and thereby recognize the differences between herself and the king. In either case, the elevation would be catastrophic if it changed the character of the maiden. For the king loved her for herself! "It was harder for him to be her benefactor than to lose her" for he knew that "love does not alter the beloved, it alters itself."

The king grieved. How could he help his beloved to understand him as he wished to be understood, as a lover rather than a king? "For this is the unfathomable nature of love, that it desires equality with the beloved, not in jest merely, but in earnest and truth." If their union could not be effected through the maiden's elevation to the king, it must be attempted through the king's descent to the maiden. The king realized he must appear in the likeness of a servant, as one humble enough to serve her. So he clothed himself in a beggar's cloak and went out to meet the maiden.

And how does the story end? It depends upon whether the maiden chooses to love the man who approaches her as a servant.

This parable appeared in Soren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* in 1844 and the quoted words are his. But he claimed ironically not to have plagiarized a child's fairy tale but to have stolen the poem from God. He wrote: "Forgive me, I pray, the strange delusion that I was the author of this poem [for] the poem is so different from every human poem as not to be a poem at all, but the *Miracle*."

The Miracle is this: For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son. God's love is even greater than the king's because Jesus does not just put on a beggar's cloak but becomes fully human and suffers all human experience, even death. For God so loved the world that God descended to human beings, in the form of these beloved creatures, so that God might preserve the dignity and freedom of God's people. And a beloved human being may choose to love God in return because God's true love has made relationship possible.

This love story is the Christmas story. Jesus has come into the world. Participating in this story and accepting God's love is of utmost importance to each of us. The story is about human beings' reconciliation with God through God's love.

Ordinarily, I write articles about building up the church. This Christmas story, our experience of God's love, is the reason we work to build up the church. As a faith community we celebrate that God loves us and has come into the world to be with us and we strive to share this Good News, respond to God's love and love one another (Matthew 22:36-40). Building up the church is our response (as the maiden) to the love we are offered. We choose to love and bring others to love the person who approaches us as a servant.

The parable of the king and the maiden is central to Jim's book, God's Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (Chalice Press, 2003).