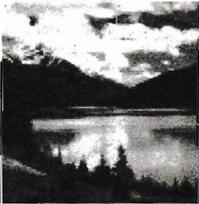


Love came down at Christmas

Paul Newman / Times Colonist

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Spiritually Speaking



Love came down at Christmas---but, of course, it was here all the time. We cannot imagine a world without love. But love ain't that simple. If you think about it we have words for love like charity, passion, friendship and family love. It doesn't quite do it to say that charity or passion or friendship or family love came down at Christmas.

There is another word that fills the bill better. Grace is a kind of love that can make other kinds of love healthy. Grace makes charity healthy, passion healthy, friendship healthy, family relations healthy and other kinds of love healthy.

Take the case of aspiration. When we aspire for something we have a kind of love for it. It is the power of wanna be. What do you wanna be? You wanna be rich, healthy, loved? You wanna be OK? Aspiration is not a bad thing. But aspiration can cause life to be unhappy, unjust, or downright evil.

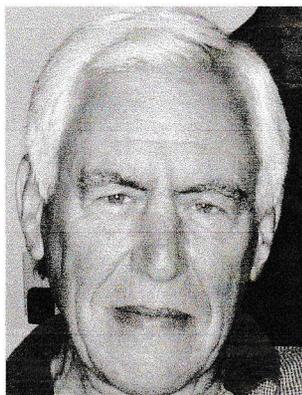
Aspiration can create anxiety. You can wanna be so badly that it makes you sick. It gives you headaches; it robs you of peace of mind; it can be an obsession. Guilt, the psychologists tell us, is basically the experience of failure to achieve what one wants to achieve. Guilt typically seeks a scapegoat to carry the blame. If you come home and kick the cat or someone else it is likely because your aspirations have not been achieved. Grace—the love that came down at Christmas can make aspirations healthy and keep them from being destructive forces. How does that work?

Imagine a student who has aspirations and goes to graduate school. She soon realizes that graduate studies is very stressful. There is a real risk of failure. Also a big financial risk. One might go home as a failure, a foolish wanna be who didn't have the right stuff. Her reputation and dignity is in question. She sees other students almost paralyzed by anxiety. She knows how they feel.

Somehow into this situation comes the power of grace. The student is given assurance that God, the Creator, not the college, nor her family, friends, or anyone else is the guarantee of her worth. Because of the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth, this student believes she is loved regardless of the

outcome of her studies. Her anxiety is overcome and replaced by healthy aspiration. Her desire to learn is liberated from stress and becomes a labour of love. For her, love has come down at Christmas.

The gift of God's love embodied in Jesus and others and spread around by the Spirit of God is what liberates people. It turns their kinds of love into blessings instead of problems. Grace lets people make love without harming each other; lets people give charity with genuine kindness; lets people be friends without co-dependency or jealousy; lets people in families love each other without controlling each other. Amazing grace---the gift of Christmas that has always and everywhere been at work but that we have seen embodied in a young carpenter, a spokesperson for God the Creator, a Spirit-filled teacher, a lover of even his enemies, a companion of any who would let him live in their minds and hearts in every age. We celebrate the coming of that man because he represents the health, the salvation in other words, that the Creator wishes for every human being. Thanks be to God for the wonderful gift of love that came down at Christmas and comes down for any who seek it.



Paul Newman is a retired United Church minister, Professor Emeritus of Theology in St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon. He is the author of *Humanity and Spirit: Reasons for Hope* and *A Spirit Christology: Recovering the Biblical Paradigm of Christian Faith*. He lives in Sooke.

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