

When I was growing up I always had several Jewish friends. And in December they would talk about the eight days of Hanukkah that they were celebrating. Now, eight days sounded like a pretty good gig. I didn't know that really you get very small presents on seven of those nights. I just heard one morning of presents versus eight nights. The potential for an increased present intake was tremendous.

One year I heard that there were actually twelve days of Christmas. And I was so confused, and pretty certain my parents were holding out on eleven of those days. But it's true, there are twelve days of Christmas. December 25th through January 5th. We are only on the second day of Christmas today,

But, according to the stores, Christmas is over this year. Yesterday my email was inundated with "after Christmas" sales announcements. This morning malls are open, presents are being exchanged, deals are being had and by this time next week, there will be Valentine's candy in the stores.

That's what it's like outside of those doors. But inside of them, something is different. Today is what is called the first Sunday after Christmas. Next Sunday will be the second Sunday. And after that, we will celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. On that day we celebrate how Christ was made known to the world as the Wise Men reached the manger.

So, Christmas may be over outside the doors of this church, but here, it is only just beginning. We have a ways to go until we let this season go. We have ten days left to fill with Christmas.

Now, be honest. Does that terrify you? How many of you, at the end of the day yesterday, thought you were all done? The presents were all bought, the Christmas dinner prepared, the decorations perfect. And finally everything was done for one more year. And now you come to church and hear "ten more days". Absolutely anxiety producing, right?

Except, Christmas is something different than what you've been told. Christmas is not sales and lights and busy stores and presents. It's not the one day holiday that caps a full and frenzied season. It's something else entirely.

Now, here's the good news. Remember that feeling you had preparing for yesterday? You don't have to feel that for the next ten days. Instead, the celebration gets to look a little different. Let me help you imagine what that might be like.

Christmas Eve is hardest on preachers far from home when it falls on a Friday night. By the time you get out on Friday night, there's no time to catch a plane and then turn around again in time for Sunday. And so, yesterday I spent my first Christmas ever away from home.

I wasn't sure what that would look like. But gradually, a plan started coming into place. And yesterday a group of my friends met at a Chinese restaurant in Northampton to celebrate what we jokingly called "Bachelor's Christmas".

We were all far from home. Mostly physically; there were a lot of Southerners. But for some, emotionally. For some the separation from home was a spiritual one. It was what brought them into the arms of friends yesterday, because that was as close as it got to them for family.

As we were sitting around the table, a friend calculated that we came from about eight different religious traditions. All those paths brought to one table. All those paths, from UCC to Presbyterian to Catholic to Mormon to Quaker, all meeting at an unlikely

Christmas table. Some came with stories of family rejection. Some with a past filled with negative experiences of the church. Some with the pain of feeling like the whole world around them was celebrating when all they could do was cry.

It was the oddest Christmas I have ever had. And yet, it might have been one of the most memorable. Because rarely have I seen people come to the Christmas table with so much honesty and openness.

It struck me, that that's what Christmas really is. It's not about the perfectly prepared meal. It's not the gifts wrapped neatly under the tree. It's about the reality of a Christ who came to love us. Because I know if Christ were to come again in person, he wouldn't show up in the churches or the nicest homes. He'd be at that Chinese restaurant table. He would be in the Christmas day 12 step meeting. He would be with the kid on the street who is broken and crying and kicked out of their home. Because Christ is love and that is where love is needed.

And so that was my cue for the next ten days. These are not the days to take down the tree as fast as we can, and to move on to the next holiday. These are not the days of gift returns and errands. These are the days of announcement. These are the days when that message we heard Friday night gets spread. These are the days when we are especially chosen to share the love and light and mercy of Christ. They are a time of holy stopping, and holy loving.

On Friday night, we lit a candle off the Christ candle, and we began to light the candles in the pews. The light was passed from one person to another until the sanctuary was entirely lit. And then, we slowly made our way out into the world. That's what Christmas is about. It's about the slow burning of Christ's love. The unquenchable fire that can light the world. The radical in-breaking of God into this world.

And so, here is the challenge. When you leave here today, how are you going to celebrate Christmas? What are you going to do to make concrete the love of God. What are you going to do to tell the story? Because in these days of Christmas, how can we keep silent about what we saw when we came to the edge of the manger?

I'll leave you with this. I am really blessed to have a surrogate family of friends. I have adopted sisters and brothers I can call at 3am and who would pick up the phone and come running if I needed them. And I know they know I'd do the same.

But, like most of us, I don't come from a place where you spontaneously tell people you love them.

I have one friend who is sort of an adopted baby sister. And we saw each other last week. One thing we do when we get together is pray. And, we're both preachers, so you can imagine that takes a long time. On this evening we prayed, and then she turned to me. I can't remember what she said exactly, but essentially she put her arm on mine, and said "I love you, and I know God made us a part of each others lives."

I've had similar experiences with several other people in the last few days. And each time it has moved me tremendously. From that moment in church, to the text message a friend sent last night just saying "I love you" after a hard conversation, to the phone call from two friends who just wanted to tell me that I was wonderful the way that I was, each time that blew my heart right open.

The stores are going to tell you that the time to say I love you comes in about six weeks. And they're going to wrap it in heart shaped boxes. Don't believe them. The time to say I love you is now. Because Christmas is about God loving us so much, that God

came to tell us in person. And I am convinced that each time we tell another person that, we spread God's love and God's Christmas message just a little more. And so, when we say "Merry Christmas" we should mean it to say, "I love you so much, because God has loved us so much". And so, allow me to say Merry Christmas to you all. Amen.