Who stole baby Jesus? I suppose this is a strange question to ask on the eve of the birthday of Jesus, yet, the question seems appropriate this year. Last Friday I was walking our dog at Sorosis Park. It was dark, as it usually is by 5:00 p.m., and as I rounded the corner on the back side of the walking path, I heard Christmas music. My first thought was that someone was playing their iphone loudly as they walked, but as I started to walk over to the area adjacent to the college, I saw people sitting around the covered area in a blue lighted tent, and they were playing and singing Christmas music.

I casually walked over to the small group of 4-5 people singing, and asked what they were doing. There was no crowd of people to listen to the Christmas hymns being played or sung, just me and Lucy, my dog. They had created a small portable manger scene, and they were taking turns each night playing Christmas music in the park. They said, ‘if people show up to listen,’ then that was fine, but they had no expectations. I mentioned that it was too bad they couldn’t just leave their tent up for the next night, and one of the younger kids said, “Yeah, we would do that, but last year Jesus was taken several times, so now we hang around for an hour to make sure Jesus isn’t stolen.”

Who would steal baby Jesus? This was something for me to ponder. Who would want to steal a wooden figure of baby Jesus, when most people struggle with the idea of going to church? And, then a light bulb turned on inside me, “Ahh, I know why baby Jesus is stolen?” It’s a simple way to feel connected to God, or at least, that is my best guess. Many people grow up listening to stories of Jesus being born in a manger, until we grew out of it. And, then, a time comes when you need something more than the world can offer. Maybe you’ve had a bad day, or you just lost a family member to Covid, so seeing the baby Jesus allows you to relax and recall a time when life was not so complicated or hard.

People have strong feelings about the name Jesus; you might say they carry their own experiences of the baby Jesus inside themselves, regardless, if they attend church. Hearing the name Jesus can be layered with deep emotion. And, so tonight, as we watch the candles flick their shadows onto the walls of our heart and the walls of this church, I want us to ponder a Jesus that stays with us, day in and day out … a Jesus we take with us.

As a Christian, we read stories about Joseph, Mary and Jesus each Christmas. Historians and theologians have spent countless hours striving to make sense of this narrative, asking one main question, “Are these nativity stories found in Matthew and Luke true?” Only you and I, of course, can answer that question, just like the person who stole baby Jesus had their own reasons for taking a wooden Jesus. Because knowing Jesus is complicated, or it seems complicated in the 21st Century. The sad thing is, knowing Jesus was intended to be easy.

Christians in the 2nd to 4th centuries following the death and resurrection of Jesus, would not have asked whether these stories concerning the birth of Jesus were true or false? Instead, they would have asked this question, “How can I live my life like Jesus?” These young Christians would have known that the real story of Jesus, from birth to death, was meant to be shared, not be chained to a certain way to think about Jesus. When Christianity became the state religion under Constantine in the 4th century, you might say, Jesus, the Emanuel, which means God with us, was scrapped for a political agenda, and the church became boxed in by power. Instead of following in the footsteps of Jesus who demonstrated love and humility, Christians learned to live by a set of rules.

The name Jesus, then, became a discipline on how to live a pure and sinless life, yet Jesus only taught how to love in a certain way. How would our lives change if we focused our efforts on how to love in a certain way rather than how to behave in a specific way. For you see, the narrative we read tonight about Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus is a story on learning how to love during a very difficult time. It’s a story of trust.

The shepherds had a right to be fearful when the angel appeared, yet, these wonderful and often spoken words by the angel are meant to ease the fear they may have felt in that first moment when the angel spoke these words, “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Do you hear that? All people are to share in this good news, and the good news is this, Jesus will teach everyone how to love God with all their heart, mind and soul, and love their neighbors as themselves. This message of love was not just for people who called themselves a follower of Jesus, but all people who wanted to share their love with one another has a place in the Kingdom of God.

We see Jesus in all kinds of places. We see Jesus whenever we recall that Emmanuel, God-With-Us, can still be seen embracing those who grieve, who suffer, who struggle in countless ways the world over. We see Jesus when people give comfort to lonely people during the holidays.

We have seen Jesus during the pandemic, where caregivers reached across political aisles to hold the hand of a dying person. Perhaps, you too, have seen Jesus when people have responded by helping each other through Face Book, or recently, maybe you shoveled snow off your neighbors’ walkway. Sacrificial love has no boundaries.

Before Jesus became a commercial commodity, he was a small babe lying in a manger, born of humble and poor parents. Jesus grew into a young man and we find that Jesus had a tender spot for the downtrodden, where you found him healing and helping those who were despised. Whenever we choose to love rather than judge other people, we share the Spirit of Jesus. Only you know when love has had its way in your life. In fact, the real truth is, love is a much tougher taskmaster than obligation, because we carry the responsibility of loving on our own shoulders.

No GPS is needed to find Jesus. For Jesus is as near as the next act of generosity shown to someone for whom a moment of kindness will make all the difference --- sometimes this kindness effects them for the rest of their lives.  Jesus is there in every act of selfless sacrifice offered for another.  Jesus is with us when we have nothing to give but our hearts.

People may only hear these stories of Joseph, Mary, the Shepherds, and Jesus one time a year, yet, there is a child in all of us who can respond. These stories of God being birthed in a manger to walk among us have been told for centuries, so it is up to us on whether we want to be like Jesus. As children, we think like children, but as we age, have we lost the Spirit of love Jesus poured out onto the people he met. Does the story of Christmas still carry a miracle inside your heart?

I Corinthians 13:11-13 allows me to ponder whether the child in me can still feel the miracle of Jesus being born in a manger. Let me read a small portion from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, a church who struggled knowing on how to be like Jesus. This is what Paul said:

“When I was an infant at my mother’s breast, I gurgled

and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those

infant ways for good. As an adult Paul says, “we don’t yet

see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through

a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and

the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all then, see it all as clearly

as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

But for right now … we have three things to do to lead us to knowing Jesus … trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly,

love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.”

Who stole Jesus? I hope we have stolen Jesus. Each time we choose love over self-interest, we have stolen Jesus. When love becomes our foundation for living, perhaps we will then feel a little like Mary did after the angels left, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” We are to ponder the gift and life of Jesus. Amen.