

Finish this sentence...they will know we are Christians by ??? (Our Love)

Or is it by our politics.

Or by how much money we give to charity.

Or by our arguing over Starbucks holiday cups.

Or by insisting that Merry Christmas be said – instead of Happy Holidays or X-mas.

Or by keeping Christ in Christmas.

Or by faithfully, consistently attending church every week.

Or by praying more.

Or by inviting people to worship.

Or by our outstanding church potlucks.

I admit that praying more, and faithful worship, and representative politics, and generous giving, and good food can be part of who we are as Christians.

But nothing can compare to the ways we love.

And yes it is common practice to fight these first world issues about coffee cups or holiday greetings – causes that should have no basis. It isn't our job to keep Christ in Christmas.

Saying Happy Holidays not only is respectful of our neighbors, but means happy holy days – which is what we celebrate (8 different religions have a major holiday between Nov and Jan).

And did you know X-mas is actually very faithful, because the letter X in Greek is shorthand for Christ.

But even with all those points – which I am sure astounded you, and you will surely share them during family celebrations - still, do not show who we are as Christians..... as much as love.

And unfortunately we are known more for hypocrisy of faith, than we are for love. We fight more over biblical interpretation – than we do for the poor and marginalized. We argue more with other Christian denominations over baptism or communion or who can preach – than we do about caring for others in our community.

And we avoid love, we protect ourselves from loving. We want to love, we hope that people are taken care of. But we don't want to be the ones to do it all the time. So we choose when we want to engage, and when we want to disengage.

We give our time and gifts when it is convenient for us. I know that is how we do it in our family. We choose to serve and love when it fits in our schedule. Or we recognize it is the end of the year and quick donate to a favorite charity to get our tax credit.

We do good things – and the church, Bristol included – does great work in our communities – but that doesn't change the fact that most of the time we are lukewarm followers of Christ.

It's easy to get caught up in things that take us away from God's mission. We get caught up in the celebration of Christmas, the warm fuzzy feelings of this season, the egg nog and hot chocolate, the parties and Christmas decorations – we forget that Christmas isn't all ribbons and lace.

Christ is sent, come down to bring hope and peace to the people – to you and me, and to anoint us for loving creation. God disrupts us! Being followers of Christ, being Christians isn't about all the periphery stuff. It is easier to display a nativity of Christmas, than to actually do the mission that Christmas demands throughout the year.

We don't just sit and wait. Waiting of Advent isn't passive.

We don't wait for ourselves. We wait, yet we believe the promise that will come. And as we wait, we hope -but we don't hope that someone else will do the loving that God requires of us.

Isaiah's prophetic poem is not reserved for Isaiah alone. Just as when Jesus reads from the scroll in the temple, the prophecy is not fulfilled only by Christ.

Because the anointing has been poured onto all of us by the spirit of God.

Advent/Christmas is not a vacation. It is a call to action, not apathy. To be God's presence to others who need to see and feel and taste the love of God. That is the message of Christmas for which we prepare, and the mission we are given.

God's promises are clear...

God has anointed you.

God has sent you to bring good news to the oppressed and to bind the brokenhearted.

God has sent you to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release the prisoners.

God has sent you to comfort those who mourn, and put garland around them, and praise them.

God uses us to repair broken communities. Strangers together in a strange place, feeding each other, work side by side with foreigners, people of every gender, race, sexuality, age - for the good of God's kingdom.

God has named all of us ministers of God. All pastors. All preachers. All deliverers of God's act of love, and peace and grace.

God loves justice, not self-serving desires, and God has made a covenant for us, a promise – which we wait for, and which we live out now.

Isaiah was speaking to people who were devastated - returning from exile – coming back to destroyed homes, with no hope, no joy – their lives felt ruined.

And many people – for many reasons – feel that their lives are ruined today. People have been shamed and belittled and hurt, and broken. And are in desperate need of love. The promises of God may feel far off (and maybe the final promise/hope is far away) but the love of Christ that has come down to earth - is found in you and me today. It is because of Jesus ,we are able to love at all. This is Advent prophecy.

A self-fulfilling prophecy...we believe in love so passionately, that it comes true...we live toward that vision expecting it to happen. Admitting that the prophecy is being fulfilled by God, through Christ, and through follower of Christ...us.

How will they know we are Christians?

By loving. By imitating the One who was love, who brought good news and bound the broken, and released those in prison, and comforted those who mourned.

When Jesus comes back, he won't care about coffee cups and worship attendance – but will care that we loved.

We'll know we are ready for Christmas...when we live that message in our actions towards others.