

To me it never quite feels like Christmas until my wife and family are all crowded into the living room, passing around plates of goodies, and fighting for that last comfortable spot on the couch - before we settle in to watch some of our favorite Christmas movies after church.

There are the classics - like Miracle on 34th Street, and a Charlie Brown Christmas special that are a must watch year after year. Followed closely by other newer favorites like Home Alone, a Muppet Christmas, and Die Hard. Okay - maybe Die hard is an acquired taste for Christmas.

But my favorite movie to watch, without any debate is "Elf" – a film from the early 2000's starring Will Ferrell. It's a wonderful comedic tale of a baby named "Buddy" who is accidentally transported to the North Pole as a toddler and raised as one of Santa's Elves. Without giving too many spoilers away, Buddy finds it difficult to shake the feeling that he has never truly fit in – literally and figuratively – leaving him no choice but to leave the North Pole in search of his human family in New York City.

His new found kin reluctantly take him in expecting Buddy to fit into their big city life. However, the cultural clash between buddy's cheerful elf like demeanor and his father's upstate business driven existence soon prove more than either party bargained for, and conflict begins. For example, Buddy still dresses like an elf from the North Pole, thinks the four main food groups are: candy, candy canes, candy corns, and syrup, and full heartedly believes that the best way to spread Christmas cheer, is to singing loudly for all to hear! Needless to say his actions and beliefs don't match the customs and traditions of the world he has tried to embrace.

One of my favorite moments of the film is the scene of their first family dinner together. His new found Mother has served spaghetti and as they begin to eat, to everyone's surprise Buddy asks, "Please pass the maple syrup." "It's spaghetti..." his mother reminds him – looking quite puzzled by his request. Yet, the ever resourceful, cheerful elf doesn't miss a beat saying, "Oh... I think I have some right here!" And he reaches up into the sleeve of his coat, pulls out a little bottle of maple syrup, and proceeds to pour it all over the top of his spaghetti – to his families shock and horror!

Buddy does things differently than 'the rest of us.' Although he is immersed in a different way of seeing the world, he brings the foundation of what he knows about Christmas with him - love, joy, hope and peace - wherever he goes. And he's not afraid to pour it out on everything, letting it flow all over the place, even if everyone around him thinks he's out of his mind!

In the Sundays leading up to Christmas we've been talking a lot about what this season

means for us here as a community of faith. We've talked about making Christmas about more than shopping, decorating, and consuming this year, making more space for the light of Christ's love to shine through our words and actions as we prepare to celebrate Jesus birth. We've tried to give back in helpful ways – partnering with Greenfields school age day care to collect much needed winter clothing items for those living with homelessness and inadequate shelter this year.

And encouraging our congregation to give *Gifts of the Heart* like goats, school supplies, and micro loans for community minded start ups around the world through Canadian Lutheran World Relief. We've gone out carolling to spend time with some of our grieving and home bound friends. And we have tried to think about how we can make changes in our lives to better reflect what this season is actually all about.

Perhaps you've tried to do that this year as well.

Maybe you have resolved to dial things back this Christmas. Perhaps you even started planning with great intentions. You may have thought "This year I'm going to do it! I'm not going to succumb to the pressure! I refuse to be exhausted and stressed out and in debt. I'm going to make presents for people, or give some alternative charitable gifts. I'm going to spend time with those I love rather than spending countless hours in mall lines with people I don't even know! That type of planning is great.

But then the 'season' hits and sometimes our resolve to do things differently - that don't quite mesh with our traditional Christmas plan. When cultures clash we think, "Wait a minute - how many presents are too many for the kids? And I need to stop off and get more wrapping paper and some of those little meatballs everyone likes so much, and how am I going to find time to do all this in the middle of baking for the 75 extra activities our family is trying to take part in this Christmas?"

And by the time we get to today / tonight, it feels like our whole plan to keep the love, joy, hope, and peace of Christmas central has failed. But it doesn't have to.

No matter how many gifts you have under your tree or how many cookies you've baked or how stressed you feel, you haven't missed Christmas - and if you didn't know it – like Buddy the Elf you have a secret little bottle of maple syrup tucked up your sleeve. The first Christmas happened much like every Christmas ever has - amidst the stresses and busyness of our real life in the world.

As we have heard tonight Mary and Joseph – a pregnant teenage mom with a fiancée barely hanging on, find themselves in the midst of a mass migration to be counted by the emperor in the census of the century. It seems all of region had descended on

Josephs hometown when the tired couple arrived looking for any room to sleep in that would have them. Desperate for rest – they finally settle on the best they could find, a stable, and put up with the animals, and the dirt, and the smells, until Mary delivers her baby. And she and Joseph, the ones chosen to raise God’s son, wrapped their newborn in bands of cloth, tucked him in a manger - and the exhausted family drifted off to sleep before the next wave of visitors would arrive to greet the tiny savior.

Just like the holy family, and Buddy the Elf – we are drawn into this season of Christmas and tempted to give into all the stress, debt, and trouble it can bring believing these things in themselves will somehow give us meaning – yet that’s not what the hope of this season is about at all.

You see, this is why you haven't failed at keeping Christmas - no matter what this season brings - because Christ IS Christmas and regardless of whether we show up at the door in the middle of the night after a divine encounter with a host of angels, or are shuffling through the whole experience more concerned about coffee and the turkey cooking in the oven, or our presents under the tree - Christ will continue to break into our lives and world, birthing the good news only he can bring.

That those suffering will be lifted up from their despair. That the grieving will know that they are not alone in the midst of their pain. That all deserve to find welcoming and loving communities to live out their life and faith. And that those wondering if there is still good in this world will come to hear and experience that there is another way forward. Not by the work of the hands of the mighty and the powerful. Nor by some pie in the sky dream we can’t take part in. But through the grace of a tiny savior who teaches us that we too can change the very foundation of the world. If we but take the time to spread the Love, Joy, Hope, and Peace God has given us with each and everyone we come to meet.

Like maple syrup these gifts of God are a sweet and holy offering – often calling us into the mess of our lives and our world, to help us to better love and support one another. And the more we let them out of the bottle, the easier they flow from our lives – helping Christ come into our midst while we are stuffing the turkey, singing carols, watching the game, or buying goats for families in Africa.

Whether you are thinking about Christ or not thinking about Christ - a tiny newborn hand is reaching out to you, reminding you of the many gift you have been given – inviting you to share and pour them out over a world in need as you celebrate Christmas.

And may this be so among us - Amen.