“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Each Sunday of Advent we light one of the candles on our Advent wreath and reflect on the gifts of hope, love, peace, and joy that are symbolized by each candle. We think about not only receiving these precious gifts, these fruits of the Spirit, from God, but also how we might share them with each other at Christmas and throughout the year.

This morning we lit the candle of love as a way to prepare for the coming of the Lord into our lives. The other candles, the other gifts, mean little unless we experience and express that most wondrous gift of all, the gift of love.

John tells us that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” The Bible tells us we are made in God’s image. If the essence of God is love, then our essence is also love. Contrary to what our contemporary culture would teach us, we are not primarily material beings; we are spiritual beings. We are incarnations of God’s creative love. This is beautifully expressed in a bumper sticker I saw several years ago: “We are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings seeking a human experience.”

God’s love is central to creation. It is central to human life. It is central to our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. God’s love connects earth and heaven, spirit and matter, the temporal and the eternal, this world and the next.

Love begins with acceptance. This is true of God’s relationship with us and our relationships with each other. Jesus tells us that God accepts and loves us as we are, even though we are sinners. We don’t have to become perfect to be acceptable to
God, to be loved by God. We are already accepted and loved. Once we realize this, our lives will be transformed and a more Christian, a more loving life will shine forth.

Jesus tells us that God is like a good and loving parent. If God is like a parent that has given birth to creation, then all creation is an expression, an incarnation or manifestation of God’s love. If God is like a loving parent that has given birth to human life, then we are all God’s children. Whether we are Christian or Muslim, believer or atheist, homosexual or heterosexual, criminal or law-abiding citizen, we are all God’s children. God loves each and every one of us.

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love ourselves. A healthy self-acceptance and self-love is grounded in an honest appraisal of both our strengths and our weaknesses. There are times when we relate to others out of love and compassion, and there are times when we find we are cold and judgmental. The wonderful feeling of being accepted and loved by God is tempered by the realization of how often we live lives that are less than we can be. As the Zen master told his student, “You are perfect just the way you are . . . but there’s always room for improvement.”

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love each other. If we are all God’s children, then we are all brothers and sisters: red and yellow, black and white. Even Muslim terrorists are our brothers and sisters. We may have to defend ourselves against people who would hurt us, but this does not mean that we cannot feel sorry for them, have compassion on them, and perhaps even love them. We do not have to hate them.

In the United Parishes of Southborough Lenten series this coming year, which for some strange reason the Southborough clergy are already planning, we have chosen the theme of ecumenicity. We want to explore how and why it is important that we build relationships with each other as members of different branches of the Christian church. Perhaps then we can expand this way of thinking into the realm of interfaith dialogue, into accepting and valuing the followers and teachings of other religions.
One of the ways we can begin to build or deepen a truly ecumenical or interfaith spirit is to identify and celebrate all we have in common. This has been our experience in our Monday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group as we note the great number of parallel sayings of Jesus and the Buddha. Often these two religious giants not only say the same thing, they say it in much the same words. Once we realize this, how could we maintain that our religion and our religious teachings are right and the teachings of the Buddha are wrong? We can say that our religion or our theology is important, meaningful, and valuable to us without having to put the other religion down.

Love, true Christian love, builds a bond between people. It is grounded in the realization that if we are all children of God, then we are all brothers and sisters. This is why, when speaking of someone whom we perceive as different from us in some significant way, it would be helpful to refer to them as “our brother” or “our sister.”

Think about it. What if we talked about “our brothers and sisters who are Roman Catholic” or “our brothers and sisters who are Muslim?” What if we talked about “our brothers and sisters who are in prison,” “our brothers and sisters who are caught up in the ideology of religious fanaticism,” “our brothers and sisters who are homosexual,” and “our brothers and sisters who are illegal immigrants?” The affirmation that they are our brothers and sisters might lead to empathy, compassion, and even love. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for us to distance from them, to see them as different from us, and to simply judge them. Then we could hopefully discover how much we hold in common.

As we light the candle of love, we are reminded that this gift of love is the greatest of all God’s gifts. Love is the great connection. When we are in God, in the kingdom of God, we are in a great field of spiritual energy, the healing energy of love. This energy has the power to transform us, to transform our relationships, and to transform the world. The converse is also true: when we love we place ourselves within the kingdom of God.
Love is one of the marks of the Christian life. It is one of the gifts of faith, one of the fruits of the Spirit. As John tells us,

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.

The message of Christmas is that God so loved the world that he became flesh, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth that we might see what God’s love looks like in human form. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

As we gather around this table in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us open our hearts to receive the gifts of the Spirit that are offered to us through the experience of Christmas. Then let us remember that although these gifts are given to us, they are not intended to remain with us. God wants us to share these gifts with each other. When we do so, we incarnate the true meaning of Christmas.

So hope, peace, joy and love abide, these four. But the greatest of these is love.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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