

ADVENT 4 -- LOVE

(12/24/17)

Scripture Lessons: The Wisdom of Solomon 11:21-12:2
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
John 3:16 - 17; 13:34-35

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent or Christmas Sunday. Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. It is also a time to prepare for the birth of the Christ child within our hearts.

The first Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of hope. When not only the days but also the times seem enveloped in darkness, it is important to have hope. We hope for an end to international conflict. We hope for an end to terrorism. We hope we will develop the collective will to stop destroying our environment, to end the unnecessary poverty that crushes the human soul, to eradicate the untreated sicknesses that claim so many lives. We hope we will be able to create the kind of world, the kind of human society that God wants us to create.

We also need to have hope as individuals. Depression and despair, which are endemic in our society, are marked by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They pull us back not only from the present but also from the future. They rob us of joy in the present moment, and they rob us of the conviction that we can create a meaningful and fulfilling life. When the way that lies before us is onerous; when it takes all the courage we can muster to put one foot in front of another; when we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is hope that keeps us going.

There is a danger, however, that lurks beneath the golden glow of hope. Hope can pull us out of the reality of the present and transport us into an imaginary future. It can pull us out of that which is real, that which is here and now, and lead us into what is unreal, that which has not yet happened. It can seduce us into thinking that some altered state of affairs in the world or in our individual lives would make us happy. This alternative state of affairs then becomes a necessary condition for our happiness.

This way of thinking guarantees not only continued unhappiness in the future; it guarantees a lack of joy in the present. We need to face and be realistic about the reality of life in the present, both in our individual lives and in the world. We need to accept this reality, even

embrace it. Only when we truly affirm our life, with its pain and sorrow, with its triumphs and tragedies as a gift from God, will our restlessness be resolved.

The second Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of peace. We hope, we long for peace on earth. We long for an end to the international conflict that resulted in the loss of over one hundred million lives in the 20th century. We also long for inner peace. We hope for release from the anxieties that beset us, the needless worry that depresses our immune system and steals years from our lives. Anxiety, like depression, robs us of life in the present. It arises from an obsessive desire to control the future. It not only pulls us out of what is real, it gives a negative or pessimistic twist to the imagined or feared future.

As the Chinese Myth of the Rainmaker reminds us, we are unlikely to create peace in the world if we are not at peace within ourselves. It all begins with us. If we can create inner peace, the peace that comes from a deep and fulfilling relationship with God through Christ, we can bring peace to those around us. It is just this inner peace, however, that so often eludes our grasp. It eludes our grasp because it cannot be grasped. Like happiness, it is a by-product of right thinking, right feeling, right speech, right action, right beliefs, and right prayer. When we are truly Christ-centered, the butterfly of peace will come and gently rest upon our shoulder.

The five themes of Advent flow together like the light of the Advent candles. How can we be at peace within ourselves when we fail to accept the reality of our life in the present, when we fail to both accept and embrace it? How can we find inner peace when we set up impossible conditions for that peace, when we make it contingent on an altered state of affairs in the outer world or in the circumstances of our lives? True inner peace, the “peace that passes all understanding,” does not depend on some external state of affairs. The apostle Paul lists it as one of the “fruits of the Spirit.” Once we experience that inner peace, we can bring it to the world around us. It is something we have to share like the light of our candles that we will share with each other this evening during our Christmas Eve service.

Last Sunday we lit the candle of joy. Once again, the themes of Advent blend together like the light that spreads out from the candles of our Advent wreath. Christmas is about joy. The angels brought to the shepherds “good news of a great joy that shall be to all the people.” This great joy which we will celebrate this evening when we close our candlelight service with the triumphant hymn, “Joy to the World,” is the birth of the Christ child in our midst.

Joy, like peace, is not only something for which we long; it is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It arises out of our grounding in the Holy Spirit. When we ground our relationship with God in Jesus the Christ and in the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, as the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 1:16, we will “rejoice always.” Paul says we will “give thanks in all circumstances.” We will give thanks in *all* circumstances! This is because joy, like peace, is not tied to the realization of fortunate circumstances, to some imaginary state of affairs for which we long. It is an affirmation of who we are and what we have right here and now.

This kind of joy, the joy of everyday living, is a quiet joy. It is not an ecstatic joy. It comes when we acknowledge our life, when we accept it as a gift, when we embrace it, when we move toward it, and when we love it. When we do this, we will find peace. We will find joy. And our hearts will be filled with love.

This is the message of Christmas. This is the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God is Emanuel--God with us! Salvation is here and now! The eternal dwells within us! The kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth! It is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The message of Christmas is that God chose to become human, to become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Remember, the incarnation of the divine on earth, the blending of spirit and matter, did not take place in some ideal manner. The baby was born of two young parents in an impoverished section of a relatively insignificant country. He was born in a barn. Few people witnessed this miraculous event, and few celebrated it. In fact, the powers of darkness did their best to kill him, to snuff out the light that he was bringing into the world.

Love is the heart of Christmas. The Gospel of John tells us, “God so loved the world that he sent his son.” God so loved the world that he became human to dwell among us. Christmas bridges or dissolves the gap between earth and heaven, between the human and the divine. It did this not only in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; it does it for us and in us as well.

When Jesus was asked what he considered to be the Great Commandment, he said that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. Since love is the most intimate of feelings, the strongest of all commitments, Jesus calls us into an intimate personal relationship with God, the kind of relationship that he had with his Father. This is the message of the spiritual text we have been reading in our Tuesday afternoon study group. The author tells us that the only way to pierce the “thick cloud of unknowing that separates us from God” is with “a sharp dart of longing love.”

How can we love that which we do not know? Obviously, we can't. This is why God chose to become human. As the prologue of the Gospel of John tells us, the Logos, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. God revealed himself to us in Jesus. He showed us what he looks like in human form. He did this so we can not only know him but also love him.

Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God. The initiative in this relationship, however, does not lie with us. God has already taken the initiative! Our love of God arises in response to God's love for us. This is the message of Christmas!

When we realize God's great love for us, for all God's children, for all God's creatures, we are moved to feel and to express this love. Jesus tells us that the first commandment is that we should love God. The second, he tells us, is "like unto it." We should love our neighbor as ourselves. We should love our neighbor as God loves our neighbor, even when our neighbor is as repulsive to us as a Samaritan was to a Jew.

Paul tells us that love is the greatest of all the spiritual gifts. He tells us that love is patient and kind. Love dissolves the self-centeredness that leads to arrogance. When we love, we cannot become caught up in grasping, in a desire for control over others or over life. When our love for our fellow human beings and also of the life that God has given us is strong, it enables us to endure, to bear whatever life brings our way.

Paul tells us that without love we are nothing. This is true not only in relation to our wife or husband, our children or our parents, our relatives or our friends. What he says applies to life. If we accept the life that is ours to live, if we embrace it, if we can come to love it, we will find the peace that passes all understanding.

We know how dark and depressing it is when we have no hope. We know how distressing it is when we cannot find inner peace. We know how dreary life can be when we fail to experience joy. We know how lonely and empty life can be when we do not love. As Paul says, we become a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." If we do not have love, we are nothing. Without love, even our good deeds bring little benefit to our soul.

The most difficult and painful condition of all, however, is when we cannot love ourselves. If you want to know what hell is like, hell right here on earth, think about people who have been taught to hate themselves. Of all the problems that people bring to psychotherapy, the worst by far is a feeling of self-hatred, of self-loathing. This, by the way, has to be taught to the

individual. We are not born with that feeling. In fact, it is totally counter to the feeling that God has for us, the great love that led to the incarnation, to the event that we celebrate as Christmas.

I don't know of an efficacious psychotherapeutic response to self-loathing. The only answer to self-loathing is a religious answer, a spiritual experience. It can only be healed through the belief and then the experience of God's great love for us exactly as we are.

This morning we listened to a passage from *The Wisdom of Solomon*. It is part of the deuterocanonical literature, those books or parts of books of the Old Testament that are found in the Greek Septuagint translation but not in the Hebrew text. These books are accepted as scripture by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches but not the Reformed churches. "Deuterocanonical" means secondarily canonical or added later to the canon.

The scripture lesson we heard this morning from *The Wisdom of Solomon*, perhaps more than any other passage of scripture, addresses the despair of those who are filled with self-hatred, those who are afflicted with self-loathing.

The author, who may have been Solomon, witnesses to God's great might. He says that in God's sight, the whole world is like a grain of dust that tips the scales like a drop of morning dew falling on the ground. Yet God is merciful. God overlooks our sins "so we can repent."

Now comes one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. In full awareness of our sin, our brokenness, our humanity, the author testifies,

*Yes, you, God love all that exists,
you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,
for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it.
And how, had you not willed it, could a thing persist,
how be conserved if not called forth by you?
You spare all things because all things are yours, Lord, lover of life,
you whose imperishable spirit is in all.*

How could God create something and not love it? That doesn't make sense. Each of us--black and white, Jew and Gentile, homosexual and heterosexual, male, female, or whatever, Christian and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist--we are all created by God. God doesn't make mistakes. God doesn't create junk. If at any time in your life you think you are a mistake, that because you are abhorrent to someone else you must be abhorrent to God, remember this passage and find your rest, your peace in God's great love for you.

Love is the heart of Christmas. Christmas begins with God's love for each and every one of us. The incarnation is an expression of this love. God's love calls forth a response in us.

Once we realize that God loves us; once we experience this great love we are moved to love God in return. Our relationship with God deepens. Then, inevitably, we find ourselves more loving of our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, for we are all children of God.

This Christmas, let us celebrate the most wonderful gift of all, the incarnation, the expression of God's decision to become flesh and dwell among us, bringing light and life to all who open their hearts to him. Let us also help to incarnate hope, peace, joy, and love in our lives that we might strengthen their creative presence in the world. Let us remember that since the first Christmas took place in the very humblest of dwellings, it can take place within our hearts.

In 1642, George Weissel wrote a hymn based on Psalm 24 entitled "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." The words are as follows:

*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates,
Behold, the King of Glory waits;
The King of Kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!*

*Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer, and love, and joy.*

*Redeemer, come! I open wide
My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide,
Let me Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in me reveal.*

In fact, if the birth of Christ does not take place within the portals, within the temples of our heart, and then transform our life, a thousand Christmases will leave the world unchanged.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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Addendum: Scripture Reading from The Wisdom of Solomon

Chapter 11

21: For it is always in thy power to show great strength, and who can withstand the might of thy arm?

22: Because the whole world before thee is like a speck that tips the scales, and like a drop of morning dew that falls upon the ground.

23: But thou art merciful to all, for thou canst do all things, and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.

24: *For thou lovest all things that exist, and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made, for thou wouldst not have made anything if thou hadst hated it.*

25: *How would anything have endured if thou hadst not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by thee have been preserved?*

26: *Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living.*

Chapter 12

1: *For thy immortal spirit is in all things.*

2: Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass, and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin, that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord.

(italics are mine)