

ADVENT 4: THE INCARNATION OF LOVE

(12/22/19)

Scripture Lessons: 1 John 4:7-21
John 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world . . .” John 3:16

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. It is also known as Christmas Sunday. This Advent season we are trying to view Christmas through the eyes of Mary the mother of Jesus. We are trying to understand what it would mean for us to be like Mary, a vessel or container for the birth of our Lord.

Each Sunday of Advent we explore one of the four traditional gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love. We think about what it would mean to give birth to these gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to incarnate them, to bring them into the world of space and time.

This morning, Bill and Ursula Guenon relit the candles of hope, peace, and joy in our Advent wreath; then they lit the candle of love. They reminded us that Advent is a time to experience the love God feels for each and every one of us. They reminded us that we should take time to remember those whom we love and those who love us. We should remember times when we have experienced the love of other people, and we should remember those times when we have experienced God’s loving presence in our lives.

This morning, I would like us to think about where love comes from. It seems to me that although we experience love, we do not create it. We discover it—or it discovers us. Love comes from God. The best we can do is receive it. When we receive it, we give birth to it; we incarnate it in the world of space and time. As we do so, we help to create our world and our own individual lives in the image and likeness of God.

Some people believe that the moral code arose naturally as a consequence of living together in community. They maintain that the emergence of these guidelines is attributable to nothing more than enlightened self-interest. It is to our benefit that we prohibit lying, stealing, and murder; these actions tear apart the fabric of society and undermine our own self-interest. To posit a divine source for morality is unnecessary and it is not supported by science.

This is probably true of many of our universal moral precepts; they really are common sense. There is no way we could live together in families, tribes, or communities without some

degree of civility. However, this is not what religion is all about, and it is certainly not what spirituality is all about. There are some feelings or experiences that are an essential part of what it means to be fully human, feelings and experiences that don't seem to have arisen through random genetic mutations or the survival of the fittest, but were rather discovered and made conscious by exceptional, by deeply spiritual human beings. With the help of their teachings and their example, these experiences of the spiritual dimension of life can be discovered, received, and made conscious by us.

A human tendency that witnesses to a deeper kind of morality than simple adherence to collective mores is the willingness to engage in a sacrificial act. How can we explain people's willingness to risk or even sacrifice their life for another person, not only for their children or family members, but for a person whom they don't even know? And yet we see this happen time and time again. People run into a burning building in an effort to save lives. People engage a terrorist rather than flee to safety, or they cover someone else's body with their own. If our strongest instinct were really self-preservation, we would never take such risks. Yet we do, and we do it without hesitation. We do it because we could not live with ourselves if we did not.

I believe that sacrificial actions, whether they make the newspaper or not, arise from a wellspring of love. They witness to a deep sense of interconnectedness, a sense of ontological oneness with the other person or persons. Jesus said that there is no greater expression of love than the willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends. This is why we are humbled by the members of our armed forces who put themselves in harm's way, by firefighters who rush into a collapsing building, by police officers who not only engage armed criminals but also intervene in situations involving domestic violence, an especially dangerous aspect of an officer's job.

Most of these people don't call what they do heroic or loving. When asked, they generally say that they are just doing their duty. They say, "I was just doing what anyone would do in that situation." First, I am not convinced that everyone would act this way in that situation. I would like to think that *I* would, but I am not sure. In any event, I think that sacrificial acts are manifestations of a special kind of love, the kind of love that Jesus had for all humanity, the kind of love that Jesus has for us. Remember, there were many points when Jesus could have walked away from a cruel and painful death. But out of his great love for us, he bore not only his cross but also ours. He died that we might live.

How could we human beings have come up with something as mysterious, as miraculous, and as beautiful as love? We couldn't have created it all by ourselves. Love helps us to see more deeply into each other and into life. Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. When we see through the eyes of love, whether we are looking at another person, creation, or *even when we are looking at ourselves*, we see a beauty that others may have missed. Life would be the poorer if we did not see others *and also ourselves* through the eyes of love.

One of the amazing things about love is that it changes both the lover and the person who is loved. Lao Tzu, the Chinese mystic, has said, "Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage." I think Lao Tzu is saying that the feeling of being loved gives us the strength we need to face the struggles of our daily life, while loving someone gives us the courage we need to go on because we know we do not live for ourselves alone. Love transforms both the one who loves and the one who experiences that love. I will be saying more about this during our Christmas Eve service.

When we love, we draw deeply from the great love of God. To use a metaphor, we are receivers and then transmitters of God's love. Note that we can only become transmitters if we have first been receivers, if we have experienced the love that we now feel compelled to share with others. To use the metaphor that we have been exploring this Advent season, if, like Mary, we open our hearts to God's presence, God's gift of love is born and continually reborn in us. We then give birth to this love, we nurture it in our lives, and it transforms us. When we give birth to it in the world, we help to usher in the kingdom of God on earth.

Of all the themes of Advent, love is the most concrete and the most dynamic. Hope is an attitude we take toward the future. Peace is that for which we long--within ourselves, within our families, and in the world. Joy is a quality of our own individual experience of life; it seldom affects others in a significant way. Love, however, never happens in the abstract; it always involves people and it always involves relationship. Love is the most powerful force in the universe. It connects us with God, and it ties us all together as children of God.

The first letter of John tells us that God is love. John tells us that when we dwell in love, we dwell in God and God dwells in us. The book of Genesis tells us we are made in God's image. If God is essentially love, then we are essentially love. Contrary to what our contemporary culture would teach us, we are not primarily material beings. We are spiritual

beings that have taken on a material form. You and I are incarnations in space and time of God's creative love. Think about that for a minute or two this Christmas!

This is the message of Christmas: God, out of a great love, became incarnate, became flesh, that we might know God more fully, love God more deeply, and follow God more faithfully. Jesus showed us what God's love looks like in human form.

Advent reminds us that God's love broke into our realm of space and time in the form of a tiny vulnerable child. This is the message that Mary heard, the message that we, too, need to hear. This is the message that can transform and redirect our lives. We, like Mary, need to respond to God's initiative with our own affirmation--"Come Lord Jesus, be born in us today!"

In this Advent season we, like Mary, can become the womb of Christ, the place where the spiritual seed of love is born and continually reborn. Like Mary, this needs to happen in our hearts, the temple of the Holy Spirit. As Angelus Silesius, the twelfth century German mystic has said, "the heart is the womb of the eternal." *The heart is the womb of the eternal.* If the Christ child is going to be born again, it will be within our heart, the center of love.

This morning, as we lit the fourth of our Advent candles, we opened our hearts to receive one of the most beautiful gifts of Christmas--the gift of love. Whenever we open ourselves to love, we are opening ourselves once again to the birth of Christ. We are opening our hearts in order that Christ will become a living reality in our hearts and in our lives.

It is because we love that our hearts go out to those who are lonely or hungry or cold in this holiday season, those whom we seek to touch through our Christmas offering to the Salvation Army. It is love that connects us with our brothers and sisters in great need around the world, that connects us on the very deepest of levels. Because of this, we care what happens to the immigrant, the refugee, those who are the objects of discrimination and prejudice because of their race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs both in our country and around the world. Because of this, we care about what will happen to the girls and women in Afghanistan when we finally extricate ourselves from this frustrating and seemingly unending conflict.

Love grows as it is expressed. There is no end to this growth, no container big enough to hold it. As the Lebanese mystic Khalil Gibran has said, "Love—it surrounds every being and extends slowly to embrace all that shall be." I think this includes not only all that is, all people,

but also the future into which we are moving as a nation. Love alone will drive out the paralyzing and polarizing effect of fear and greed that underly our social discourse and our social policy, that will help us to move forward into our future as a nation with hope.

This Christmas we need to discover love just as the shepherds and the wise men discovered the little baby in the manger. We need to let this great love into our hearts, and we need to let it loose in our world. This alone is the light that will drive out the darkness of our personal and national winter solstice.

Let us, like Mary, open our hearts to God in this Christmas season that we might become the “womb of the Eternal,” and that our Lord, the spirit and incarnation of love might be born once again within us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
December 22, 2019*