

ADVENT 4 -- GIVE BIRTH TO LOVE

(12/22/2024)

Scripture Lessons: 1 John 4:7-21

John 3:16-17

“If you hope to give birth to God on earth, remember--conception takes place in the heart, the womb of the Eternal.” (Angelus Silesius)

“Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he’s not born in thee thy soul is still forlorn.” (Angelus Silesius).

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

Today, the fourth Sunday in Advent, Christmas Sunday, Darlene and Dianne lit the fourth candle in our Advent wreath, the candle of love. They reminded us that Advent is a time to prepare for God’s entry into the world in Jesus, and it is a time to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit that is within us. They reminded us that hope, peace, joy, and love are central parts of our experience of Christmas. They reminded us that, like Mary, we can give birth to these gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the world.

Probably the most important of the gifts that we can both receive and share this Christmas is the gift of love. As strange and as difficult it can be at times, we are called to love this majestic, mysterious gift of creation! As strange and as difficult it can be at times, we are called to love all living beings, all sentient beings! We are called to love everyone! We are called to love one another as God loves us! At Christmas, perhaps especially at Christmas, we should feel a deep gratitude for those whom we love, for their presence in our lives, and for the love they feel and share with 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, on Christmas Sunday, I would like us to think about love. In particular I would like us to think about where love comes from. It seems to me that although we experience love (at least, I hope we do!), we do not create it. We discover it—or it discovers us *and it creates us*. Love comes from God. We can give birth to it; we can incarnate it in the world of space and time; and as we do so we help to create our world and life in the image and likeness of God.

As you are probably aware, some people believe that our moral code, the mores that guide our behavior 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 obviously to our benefit that we prohibit lying, stealing, and murder; for if we lived in a society that condoned these actions, where they were acceptable ways of interacting,

there is no way that we could avoid being negatively affected. They maintain that to posit a divine source for our moral code is unnecessary and not supported by science.

I suspect that what they are saying is probably true of many of our universal moral precepts; they really *are* common sense—or they should be. 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 or made conscious first by exceptional human beings, deeply spiritual human beings. Now, with the help of their teachings and their example, these experiences of the spiritual dimension of life can be discovered or made conscious by us.

One of the contra-intuitive examples that witness 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 a desperate effort to save lives. People engage a terrorist rather than flee to safety, or they cover someone else's body with their own when a mass murderer is spraying bullets into a crowd. If our strongest instinct were really self-preservation, we would never take such risks! Yet we do, and we do it without hesitation!

It seems clear to me 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 our soldiers 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 probably wouldn't call what they do heroic or loving. They are more likely to 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 they would, but I am not sure. 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 us, 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.

When we love, we draw deeply from the great love of God. To use a metaphor, we serve as 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 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. Then 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, though deeply moving, is a relatively transient experience. Love never happens in the abstract; it always involves people, and it always involves relationship. Love is the most powerful force in the universe! It is the ultimate force that connects us with God and that ties us all together as children of God.

The first letter of John tells us that God is love. If 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 who may or may not be seeking a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings that have taken on a temporary material form. You and I are incarnations in space and time of God's creative love!

This is the message of Christmas: God so loved the world that he became flesh. He became incarnate that we might know him more fully, love him more deeply, and follow him more faithfully. Jesus showed us what God's love looks like in human form.

Advent reminds us that God so loved the world that he began the process of transforming it by coming into our realm of space and time in the form of a tiny vulnerable child. This is the message that Mary heard so many years ago, 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. And it is from this experience of love that we hold them in our prayers.

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 difficult future into which we are moving as a nation. Love alone will drive out the paralyzing and polarizing effect of fear and help us to move forward into our future 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
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An audio version of this sermon will (hopefully) be posted on our church website later this week.