

## ADVENT 4: SHAPING YOUR SOUL THROUGH LOVE

(12/18/2022)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 13:1-13  
John 15:12-17

*“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”*  
(1 Cor. 13:13)

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12)

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. In our Advent worship we prepare ourselves for not only the celebration, but also the experience of Christmas. Advent helps us to prepare for the birth, the incarnation of the Christ child in our lives that we, as twenty-first century disciples and apostles, might incarnate his presence and bring his gospel of peace and love to the world.

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 feelings, these attitudes which we recognize as fruits of the Holy Spirit, in our lives. We think about what it would mean to incarnate these gifts, to bring them into the world of space and time, just as Mary did with the baby Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem on that special night so long ago.

This morning, Emily and Meagan relit the candles of hope, peace, and joy in our Advent wreath; then they lit the candle of love. The candle of love is lit on the fourth Sunday of Advent, Christmas Sunday, because love is the most important of all the gifts.

There is a second reason why today is a special Sunday. We have welcomed six new members of our church family into full membership, full fellowship, full communion with our church in this, the Advent season. The Advent season, a time of expectancy and preparation, is a beautiful time to welcome new members! After all, Christmas was just the beginning of the story for Jesus and, also, for us.

The occasion of new members joining our church lends itself to a sermon about discipleship, a sermon extolling the stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure. As we heard this morning, the apostle Paul calls us to reflect on how we can use the nature and variety of our gifts to serve our church and, through our church, to serve the world. Paul reminds us that our gifts and talents are not to be used for our own benefit; they are entrusted to us “for the common good.”

To those of you who joined the church today, Paul is speaking to you. Each of you has special gifts and talents; I happen to know this is true. When you share your gifts and talents

with the church, you are building up the visible church and, also, the mystical body of Christ. Paul tells us,

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. (Romans 12)*

Because we are one in Christ, we are an integral part of each other. This is what it means to be a member of a Christian community, especially a Christian community like our church.

We know that what Paul is saying is true. We celebrate the rich diversity and generosity of our members. If each of us is truly an incarnation of God's great creative Spirit, as I believe we are, it is inconceivable that we would not have something special to give to our church and to one another. In fact, a central part of our spiritual journey is discovering what we have to offer to the great stream of life. What better place to discover this and to live it out than in communion with the church?

When new members join the church, I am tempted to preach on the theme: "Ask not what your church can do for you; ask rather what you can do for your church." This morning, however, I am going to resist that temptation. This morning I would like us to think not about what we can do for our church, but rather what our church can do for us.

I know I am treading on dangerous ground. Every church has its share of members who focus only on what their church does for them or, even more commonly, complain about what their church is not doing for them. Their church never quite lives up to their expectations. I'm not suggesting we join forces with this group. I'm suggesting that they have a point, but not in the way they think.

Orlo Strunk, one of my professors at Boston University, suggested that religion is the systematic, organized, collective attempt to address the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence. The church is the context, the community within which we address these existential questions. The church provides us with resources to help us in this quest. It provides us with resources for our own spiritual journey.

One of the fundamental recurrent questions of human existence, perhaps the most important, is the meaning of life. Is there a meaning to life? If there is, what is it? What is the meaning of life in general? What is the meaning of our life in particular? There are many possible answers to this question. The way we answer this question will largely determine the course, the direction, the unfolding of our life.

This morning, I would like to suggest an answer that was proposed by the deeply spiritual Romantic poet John Keats who said, “Call the world, if you will, the vale [the valley] of soul making; then you will know the purpose of the world.” Keats suggests that not only the meaning of life, the meaning of our individual life, but also the meaning of the world itself is to shape or deepen soul.

What is our soul? Our soul is the spiritual center of our being. It is the image of God that is planted deep within us. Our soul is the essence of our being, that which lives on after the death of the body. It is the precious gift of eternity that has been entrusted to us by God.

Our soul shapes our life from the inside. It shapes who we are and the way we live. It guides us; it calls us; it draws us back as often as we depart from the path. A beautiful soul will always shine forth, will always find ways to manifest in that person’s life.

The opposite is also the case. The manifold experiences of our life shape our soul. It works both ways. We shape the outer world, and the outer world shapes us. I believe that as our soul is shaped, as our soul evolves or deepens, we evolve as human beings. As this happens, we contribute to the evolution of God.

How does the world, to use Keats’s metaphor, shape or deepen our soul? Our soul is shaped by our life experiences and, perhaps even more importantly, our response to these experiences. Some of the events of our lives are chosen, while others, certainly the majority, are thrust upon us. Whether the determinative factors or forces in our life are chosen or thrust upon us by fate, in the last analysis I believe that our soul is shaped most deeply by who or what we love, who or what we make a commitment to, and who or what we struggle with.

To those of you who are English teachers, please forgive me. I know this last statement is grammatically incorrect in several ways, but I can find no other way to say it.

Think about what has shaped the central core of your identity, what has made you into the person you are today. I suspect that whether it was your family upbringing, a special person in your life, a special relationship, a profession, or simply a turn of events, it was not always an experience of pleasure. The experiences that have shaped you most deeply probably involved love, commitment, and probably even struggle, hardship, or tragedy. As Victor Frankl, who wrote *Man’s Search for Meaning* out of his experiences in a death camp would remind us, our soul is shaped not only on the heights, on the mountaintops, in what Abraham Maslow calls our “peak experiences,” but also, as John Keats suggests, in the vales, the valleys, the low and even dark places of our lives. I think Job would also agree.

As the apostle Paul would remind us, everyone here this morning has something special to give to this church. We celebrate the diversity of our gifts. But we need to remember that this church has something special to give to you. This church offers you a tremendous opportunity, perhaps the most important opportunity--the opportunity to shape your soul.

Those of you who are entering into full fellowship, full membership, full communion with our church today are doing so on the fourth Sunday of Advent, on Christmas Sunday, the day when we light the candle of love in our Advent wreath. What could be more appropriate? Love is a gift from God that we pray will incarnate in our life; it is a gift that we are called to incarnate in the world. The apostle Paul tells us that our soul, the core, the center of our being, is shaped most deeply by who or what we love.

To those of you who have just entered a deeper fellowship with our church, and to those who are already a part of our church family, our relationship with our church should be a relationship marked by love. If we love our church for what it has meant to us, to others, to our community, we will place this church in a central part of our lives. It will become a central part of our spiritual journey, an important resource in the deepening of our relationship with God.

When we love someone, when we take someone into our heart, it changes our life. It changes us--for good. It makes us more loving. It helps us experience the deeper dimensions of love, the kind of love that calls us to make sacrifices. Paul tells us that the kind of love that is patient and kind helps us see past the flaws that can be so annoying to those who do not love. Love enables us to accept those whom we love as they are, and to celebrate them as unique incarnations of God.

When we love someone, our love also changes that person—for good. In our relationship with those whom we love, love helps us see the best in them, and it helps them to embrace, to actualize this potential in their life. This is true of our interpersonal relationships; this is true of our relationship with the world; this is true of our relationship with life. It is also true of our relationship with our church. When we love our church, that love will shape the church. That love will also shape our soul.

I believe that Keats would agree that our soul is deeply shaped by our commitments; it was for him. To those of you who have just embraced a deeper fellowship with our church, and to all who are already a part of our church family, you have made a commitment to this church. Commitment strengthens the bonds that hold us together. It calls us to be faithful, to remain connected and caring even during difficult times. Commitment plants our feet in the ground and faces us in a certain direction. When we are committed, we cannot be blown about by the many winds that buffet a more superficial relationship.

Commitment establishes a center and a direction to our life. Unfortunately, because most people aren't committed to a church, the church doesn't shape them, doesn't shape their soul. They may or may not attend worship, depending on how they feel on a given Sunday morning. They may or may not support a church financially. They may or may not share their gifts and talents with a church. This is not the same as a commitment.

Commitment calls us out of the crowd that hovers on the periphery of the church, those who may want to be married or have their children baptized or bury their loved ones in a religious building, but who make no commitment to our community. These people are, of course, welcome to take from our church whatever they find meaningful or helpful. Everything we give we give freely! However, without a loving commitment to support our church through the sharing of their time, talent, and treasure, these people will have little impact on the church, and the church will have little impact on them. They will miss an opportunity to shape their soul.

We know this is true. If we keep one foot in and one foot out of a relationship, that relationship will never shape our soul. When we make a commitment to a person, to a profession, to a community, or to a spiritual discipline, this commitment will shape our soul. This is also true of our relationship with the church.

Finally, I believe Keats would agree that our soul is shaped most deeply by that with which we struggle; it was for him. We have many struggles over the course of our lives. Some of us have struggled with serious physical illness, serious mental illness, or with an addiction. Some of us have struggled with the pain of terrible loss or trauma. Some of us have had to struggle in our relationships with those whom we love, sometimes with members of our family. With some of us, our individuation, the quest to find and live out our true, our authentic identity has been a struggle. These and the many other struggles of our life can truly shape our soul.

To those of you who today have embraced full membership, full fellowship with us, and to those who are already a part of our church family, church membership sometimes involves a struggle. We need to remember that the goal of church membership is not to avoid the potentially transforming fires of conflict, but to let our conflicts, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, give rise to growth.

To those of you who have become full members of our church today, I don't know how to tell you this, but our church is not a perfect church! The members of our church family are fallible human beings who are trying to work together to create, to become the church that God calls us to be. At times we struggle with the force of inertia, the resistance to change within ourselves and within our church. We need to challenge everything that goes on within our

church that is not consistent with the will of God as we discern it through the heart and mind of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to embrace what it means to be an open, affirming, and welcoming church, a church that devotes all its resources to helping people deepen their relationship with God through Christ Jesus.

If we love someone with a deep and committed love, we don't walk away when times are tough. This is the meaning and function of vows. When we become members of a church, we take vows. If we commit ourselves to the struggle that lies before us as individuals and as a church, it will shape our church--and it will also shape our soul.

This is the great gift that this church offers to those of you who have embraced full membership, full fellowship with us today, and to all of us who are members of this church family. It offers us the opportunity to shape our souls in a beautiful way. It presents us with one more example of a fundamental truth about life: that our soul is shaped most deeply by our loves, our commitments, and our struggles.

I find it interesting, though perhaps it should be obvious, that we usually find all three in the same relationship.

And so, hope, peace, joy, and love abide—and the greatest of these is love.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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