

December 11, 2016

"Love"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

I Corinthians 13

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Today is the third Sunday of Advent – the Sunday of "Joy." And next Sunday, the Advent Sunday of "Love," our wonderful adult and hand bell choirs will be sharing a beautiful cantata for us. So today I'm going to use my pastoral license and preach on "love", because, truly, what gives us more joy than to love and be loved. What possibly can give us more joy than to love and be loved? That's why I chose today's scripture on "love" by St. Paul. It's undoubtedly one of the most famous scriptures in the Bible. It's read at countless weddings, quoted in sermons and held up as the ideal, all-encompassing definition of love. And, the Bible tells us, "God is love," and Christ told us the two greatest commandments are to love God and love other people. So I thought I'd start by sharing with you some modern day illustrations that portray love.

From Charlotte Mortimer: The teacher in our adult-education creative-writing class told us to write "I love you" in thirty words or less, without using the words "I love you." She gave us fifteen minutes. A woman in the class spent about ten minutes looking at the ceiling and wriggling in her seat. And then in the last five minutes she wrote frantically, and later read us what she wrote. This is what she said: "Why, honey, I've seen a lot worse hairdos than that." "These cookies are hardly burned at all." "Cuddle up closer, put your legs up here – I'll get your feet warm."

From Leo Buscaglia: A little boy I knew lived next door to an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. One day the little boy looked out the window and saw the man crying. So he went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When he came back into the house, his mother asked him what he said to the neighbor. The little boy replied, "Nothing... I just sat there and helped him cry."

From Dr. Richard Selzer: I'm standing by the bed of a young woman patient. Her face is postoperative, her mouth twisted in a palsy, clownish, manner. She will be like this from now on. A facial nerve, the one used to control the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. I had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut that nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they look into one another's eyes intently. Yet they are isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, who are they that gaze at and touch each other so generously? The young woman asks me.

“Will my mouth always be like this?” “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It’s kind of cute.” He bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works. All at once I understand. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not so bold when one encounters such a godly expression (of love).

From Ernest Havemann: You can see them everywhere – (at Dunkin Donuts in the middle of the afternoon, or at the supermarket, or walking the mall.) An old man with snow-white hair, a little hard of hearing, perhaps reading the newspaper through a magnifying glass; an old woman in a shapeless dress, her knuckles gnarled by arthritis, wearing soft shoes to ease her aching feet. They hold each others arms, and in a little while they will totter off to take a nap, and then she will cook supper, not a very good supper, and they will watch television, each knowing exactly what the other is thinking, until it is time for bed. They may even have a good, soul-stirring argument, just to prove that they still really care. And through the night they will snore unabashedly, each resting content because the other is there. They are in love, they have always been in love, although sometimes they would have denied it. And because they have been in love they have survived everything that life could throw at them, even, yes, even, their own failures.

Stories like these strike a chord with us. For stories like these epitomize love and life. Being so close with another person in mutual understanding, acceptance and joy. Love gives life meaning. Love makes life worth living. Love is a powerful force because it frames our relationships, guides our actions and makes us feel fulfilled, secure, whole. That’s why being loved is the deepest desire of our heart and soul. And yet, so often we find love lacking in our lives. Love may be stronger than death, but as all of us know, it’s also as fragile as a flower. It could slip away in an instant. Some of us have lost the ones we’ve loved the most in this life. And the pain of that loss never goes away. Love sometimes hangs in a tenuous balance. Some of us might be struggling right now with our relationship with our spouses, or our partners, or our children, our parents, or even, God. And sometimes love is elusive. Many of us sometimes feel lonely and unloved, or some, even unworthy of being loved for whatever reason. And, isn’t it true, that when we don’t sense or experience love, we feel that our lives are lacking something as important as the air we breathe.

That's why the Advent message of love is so special for all of us. Because Christmas is when we celebrate God's greatest gift to us – the incarnation of his love. When God looked out on a world so in need of love, that he sent his love in the human form of Jesus Christ. To show us just how much he loves us – loves you, accepts you, and cares for you – intimately, unconditionally, sacrificially, eternally. The great theologian and church father, St. Augustine said, “God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us.” Let me repeat, and reflect on that a minute. “God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us.” Now, how could he say that? Because... just listen to the Psalmist: “You, O God, knew me in my mother's womb. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you know my thoughts and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, Lord, you know it completely.” Jesus told us that God knows the very numbers of hairs on your head. Imagine God knowing you that intimately, that uniquely. Jesus said, “No one has a greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. And you are my friends if you do what I ask.” You are my friends. That's you and me. Close, intimate, personal friends with the God of the universe. And the best part is that not only is God's love personal, but it is unconditional. Unconditional. Meaning that even with all our foibles and failures, even with all our issues, still the love of God is there for us, given to us day after day after day. The cross proves it. As Max Lucado writes, “That's what God's love does. It puts the beloved before itself. Your soul was more important than His blood. Your eternal life was more important than His earthly life. Your place in heaven was more important to Him than His place in heaven. So He gave up His so you could have yours.”¹ Think about the enormity of all this. Can't you right now begin to feel God's love for you? And remember this – no matter what is happening in your life right now, or at any given time...God loves you and will always love you.

And once you've accepted God's incredible love for you personally, the second message of Christmas becomes obvious – and that is that you'll want to share that love with others. Because just consider...if God can invest himself and his love in the unlikely form of a man born of a woman, who suffered just as we suffer, and died, just as surely as we shall die, dare we invest less in humanity than God? Dare we? If that makes sense to you, shouldn't we take the sign of God's love for us through Jesus Christ as a sign that not only are we lovable, but that the world is worth loving as well?² Yes, “God is love.” And since we are made in God's image, we are made to love. Perhaps that's why Jesus said the two greatest commandments are love God and love your neighbor. Now granted, it is not always be easy to love our neighbor, or family member, or co-worker, the way we know we should. I mean, how often are we not

¹ Max Lucado, A Love Worth Giving

² “Acts of God,” from the book, “Sermons” by Rev. Peter Gomes

patient, not kind, instead we are irritable, proud, we demand our own way, we keep track of how many wrongs we suffered. Yes, how often do we fall short of the Biblical standard of love we heard today. That's why Lucado adds, "A marriage-saving love is not within us. A friendship-preserving (love) cannot be found in our hearts. A compassionate love for others is too demanding. We need help from an outside source."

Enter a child, born in a manger. Yes, God so loved the world that he became one of us. And then he said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Yes, you too are called to have that unconditional love for others. And you can. Because if you believe and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then it will be his love within you that will enable you to be patient and kind, and not jealous or proud or rude. You will not be irritable or resentful, or keep track of wrongs. And you will be able to believe all things, hope all things, and even endure all things. Truly, love came down at Christmas. And so my prayer for you this Christmas is that you experience that love, and give that love, like you never have before. Amen.