

Living in Love
Luke 1:26 – 38; 1 John 4:7 – 21
Sunday, December 15, 2019

Every Advent we focus on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love – how those things came into our world in the birth of Christ 2,000 years ago, and how we are *still waiting* for the *fullness* of hope, peace, joy, and love to come among us. And I don't know about you, but when I turn on the TV lately or go online to news sites or social media, I do not see very much hope or peace or joy or love. I see a lot of despair and anger and hatred and fear. And so what I want to do today, very simply, is look at what it *means* to love and how we can *live* in love; how we can be agents of Christ's love in the world.

First, it's good to remember that when we talk about love, we aren't just talking about a *feeling* or an *emotion*, something that exists in our *heart* or in our *head*. That's how the world around us conditions us to think about love, that it's just something that we *feel*. But when scripture talks about love – when *Jesus* talks about love – it's not just a feeling or emotion that exists inside of us. It's *action*. Love is about the things that we *do* to care for one another.

I always go back to Paul's words to the Corinthians, where he says that love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but it rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. What Paul is talking about there is not a feeling or emotion. He's talking about our *actions*; the things that we *do*.

To love someone is to be patient with them; to *act in ways* that show them *patience*.

It's to act in ways that are kind; going out of your way to do some small, unexpected gesture that shows someone they are important to you. You don't make them *earn* it or *deserve* it. You just *do* it.

Love is *not* acting in ways that are *envious* when another person does well or *boastful* when *you* do well. It's acting in ways that show them you are happy for them and celebrating their successes with them.

Love is not *arrogant*; it is acting toward each other in ways that are *humble*.

Love does not insist on its own way, forcing people to look or think or act like us, to do things the way *we* think they should be done. Love is acting in ways that give people the space to be who they are and *accepting* them that way.

Love does not rejoice in *wrongdoing*. It doesn't look for opportunities to prove someone wrong or say, "I told you so," celebrating when someone makes a mistake or throwing it back in their face. We love by rejoicing in the *truth*. We don't point out to people the things they've done wrong or the mistakes they have made. We look for the *good* in them and in this situation and celebrate *that*.

Love is about acting in ways that *bear with people*, hanging in there with them and sticking by them, even when it gets tough.

Love is about *believing* people and believing *in* them, looking for the *best* in them and taking them at their word; not looking at them with skepticism or suspicion.

Love is about *hoping* for people, praying for them and desiring the best for them. Asking God to *bless* them.

Love is about *never giving up* on this other person, because love *endures all things* and *love never ends*.

So love is about our *actions*, the things that we *do*, the ways that we *are* with each other. And the important thing to remember is that it's not just with the people we *like* or *get along with*. Jesus calls us to act in these ways toward the people we *do not* like. The people we *do not* agree with or get along with. The people who *annoy* us or drive us crazy. The person who has stickers on their car or posts things on social media that make you just want to *scream* at them. Jesus calls us to act in love toward our *enemies*. To be patient and kind and hopeful with our *enemies*. To pray for our *enemies*. To rejoice in truth with our *enemies*. Because when you *do* that, when you love like that, what you find is that you *have* no enemies. You have *neighbors* that you may disagree with, but they aren't your enemy.

That kind of love is very, very hard, and it seems increasingly rare if not *impossible* today. But that is the way that Jesus calls us to love. Author James Baldwin once said, "I use the word *love* not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being...not in the infantile sense of being made happy, but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." Loving each other like this – loving our *enemies* like this – is *tough*, it challenges us, but it leads us to *growth*. We grow more and more into the image of Jesus Christ.

Now, it's one thing to *know* that and *understand* that. It's another thing entirely to *do it*; to *live out* that kind of love. How do we *live* in love? It starts – I think it *has* to start – with knowing that *we* are loved; letting ourselves be loved. We see this in our reading from Luke, when the angel tells Mary that she is pregnant. The angel says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found *favor* with God.”

That word *favor* is the Greek word *charis*. It gets translated more commonly as *grace*. It's the word that gets used all throughout the New Testament when they're talking about *the unconditional love of God*. Love that does not have to be *earned* or *deserved* but is *freely given*. The angel is coming to Mary and saying, “Don't be afraid, Mary, because *God loves you*.” And it is the knowledge of that love, Mary's ability to *receive* that love that allows her to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary does not respond in *fear*. She responds in *trust* and *humility* because she knows that she is *loved*. And it's like our reading from 1 John says, “love casts out fear.” The ability to live in love begins with knowing that we *are* loved.

A couple of weeks ago, Jen and I went to see the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, where Tom Hanks plays Mr. Rogers. There's a scene where Mr. Rogers is sitting in a restaurant with this reporter who is doing a story on him, and this reporter has really been struggling. Mr. Rogers says to him, “I want you to do something with me. I want you to close your eyes for one minute and just picture all of the people who loved you into being.” All the people in the restaurant around them are overhearing this, and they all start doing it; picturing the people who loved them in such a way that it made them the people they are. And it's in that moment that this reporter realizes just how loved he is, and it begins to *transform* him.

I want you to do that with me. Let's just close our eyes for a minute and picture all of the people, all throughout your life, who have loved you. The people who loved you into being. People in the *past*, people *right now*. All the people (and even *animals*) who have loved you in such a way that it has made you the person you are. Just close your eyes and picture the people who love you.

You are *so* loved. God has put all of these people in your life to show you in some small way the love that God has for you. And the *ultimate* expression of that love is that God became one of us, lived life with us in Jesus Christ and died on a cross for us to show us the love that God has for us. And as it says in 1 John, "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Because even though no one has ever *seen* God, when we love one another, acting toward each other with patience and kindness and hope, then it's like we see God in this other person. We are able to love, John says, because God first loved us.

What the world needs now is not more righteous anger. We have enough of that. What the world needs now is love. People acting toward each other with patience and kindness and truth and hope. Because even though we may disagree, and even though we may drive each other crazy, we are all in this together, and we're all we've got. You are *so loved*, by God and by all these other people. Remind yourself of that, every morning when you get up. Picture them. Open yourself up to their love and let it be a reflection of God's love to you. And then do the best that you can to be the person that someone else pictures.