

Sunday, December 21, 2014
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Sermon - The Greatest of These is Love!

Paul says that it all comes down to love – that's it, nothing else matters.

He is reiterating a message that shines through scripture like a golden thread.

At least half the books in the bible address the importance of love.

In the beginning, God promised the people of Israel that He would show steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who loved him and kept his commandments.

Proverbs says, *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.*

Jesus said, *Love one another, as I have loved you.*

And now Paul, in addressing the people of Corinth, encourages love as the foundation for building the church.

A beautiful idea, however, we all know that love is not the easiest thing in the world.

It is not always easy to show love, or to feel it.

While, none of us wants to think of our lives as clanging cymbals or noisy gongs, figuring out how to live in a state of love is challenging.

I have found that people have distinctly individualized ways of showing love.

I don't want to generalize but the Italians in my life have demonstrated love with food.

Starting with my grandmother and then my mother-in-law and certainly my husband – food is the currency of love.

The nurturing and nourishing of another person with a meal lovingly prepared meets Paul's criteria for love.

Kind, generous, patient, giving.

I have met people who demonstrate their love by writing poetry or music, painting, weaving, or sculpting.

And others whose quiet presence, deep listening, or thoughtful compassion are their hallmarks.

There are many in our world today who show their love with money or material possessions – again a mode that can be deeply thoughtful if it is rooted in love.

King David wanted to show his love for God in today's reading by building God a great house.

God was not terribly impressed.

It was not a house God was looking for but an eternal covenant, a promise that David and his people would follow this God all the days of their lives, striving to live according to God's commands.

This love that God and Paul talk about is not made manifest in houses or temples.

Not in gifts or meals or donations.

This love is made real – incarnate – in the person of Jesus Christ.

Our challenge is to emulate that love.

We are to become God incarnate.

Our lives are to bear witness to God's love.

The Christmas message is clear and simple: in Christ, God comes to us.

Paul's description of love matches his understanding of God's love as disclosed in Christ and his understanding of what constitutes appropriate conduct for those who are in Christ or in church!

There are so many ways this can be – and has been – understood:

God's presence is not far off, but close and accessible.

It doesn't matter who we are or what our station in life is.

God came first to the poor and excluded people – shepherds, women, and foreigners – demonstrating God's commitment to loving all.

One author suggested that the heart of all this is the question of seeing.

We must see God's glory and majesty, as the psalmist did.

Paul encourages followers of Christ to see God's grace all around them and to live it out while watching and waiting for the coming of God's reign.

We must live as if we are in God's kingdom – fully present and fully aware.

In our Christmas story the shepherds are invited to see the Christ child, and in this event, see God's coming to them and to all humanity.

The shepherds had to be open to that invitation – to hear it, to see it and to respond to it.

If God comes, but we are not open to the visitation, if we have closed eyes and hearts, the coming can do nothing for us.

If the shepherds had never looked up, they would have missed the night sky ablaze with glory.

When we allow our eyes to be opened, we discover God's coming in every moment and place.

When we welcome God into our being – into our lives, we become God's love on earth.

We must see our world clearly, with all of the problems and conflicts, but then we must respond, tenderly, lovingly, as we work to mend the brokenness.

We must be the bearers of light.

It is only with this seeing that we can encourage, support and strengthen the good that is happening in the world and effectively challenge any darkness.

God's comes into our world in all different ways.

Sometimes it will be into a community – the church will feel God's call to serve in a certain way.

Other times, God might come to us individually – seeking us out and using us in specific way.

In each of our lives we have the opportunity to see God's coming, and we ought to pay attention to the places where we have resisted or ignored God's desire to enter our lives.

When we find ourselves growing more aware of God's presence and purpose in our daily routines, when we discover new capacities for compassion, humility, simplicity and joy, when we find ourselves becoming more whole in spite of the struggles of living in this world, that's when we know that we have seen God's coming to us.

Things like selfishness or fear will block God's entrance into our lives.

When we remain stuck in destructive attitudes and habits, or when we continue to allow selfishness and fear to break down relationships, when we fail to allow our eyes to be opened to God's image in others, we will have failed to welcome the Christ Child into our lives.

Ultimately, what the incarnation tells us, dramatically and powerfully, is that Christ came not just to get us into heaven, but to bring heaven to this earth.

To the extent that our lives reflect this heaven – to the extent that we become more Christ-like in our own daily lives – we are the blessed ones to whom God has, once again, come.

Our advent quote for Tuesday this week was “Be such a person, and live such a life, that if every person were such as you, and every life a life like yours, this earth would be God's Paradise.”

God's paradise is ours for the asking – but it takes work.

In an essay titled: *Vision and Venture at Advent* Bill Wilson makes an interesting point. He said:

“Venture shares a root word with Advent.

A venture is a “risky or daring journey or undertaking”.

Advent refers to the “anticipated arrival of a notable person or event”.

Put them together and you get Adventure!

As we approach our Christmas celebrations, a time when families gather and expectations of love are strong – try to view it as an adventure.

Think of these gatherings as an opportunity to witness God’s presence in ways that you might not have imagined.

Think of Mary and Joseph and how surprised they must have been at God’s arrival in their midst in the form of a baby.

Jon Vandlar points out that “The blending of anticipation and a resolve to act is at the heart of Christ’s arrival, but also his life.

Jesus did not come to inspire us to simply hold lofty thoughts and ideals, but to live changed lives.

He intends us to turn our communities upside down by adventurously walking our faith talk.”

We are called to live our lives rooted in love.

As you go through the festivities in the week ahead, approach each one with a heart full of love.

Watch for God in every face.

Listen for God in every note.

Remember: faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”