

“What Do We Really Want for Christmas? LOVE”

Luke 2:1-14 and John 3:16-17

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Today is a tricky day. It's Christmas Eve, which is why you just heard Luke 2, with the proclamation of the Good News of great joy. But it is also the fourth Sunday of Advent. So we light the fourth Advent candle, but we don't light the Christ candle until tonight.

During the season of Advent, we've been thinking about what we really want, with the help of the traditional four gifts of the season: HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE. We thank God for these gifts, and we pray that we can welcome them into our church, our hearts, our homes, and our world.

We light the candles to fight back the darkness. Together with these candles lit, we keep waiting, praying, and working to make HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE more present in the world.

Today's word is LOVE. The scripture reading is one of the most familiar Bible verses—John 3:16. But we'll also hear, verse 17, which makes it clear that God's desire, God's intention is to love and save the whole world.

Listen for God's word:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but would have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Today we celebrate LOVE. The Bible has a lot to say about love. In addition to John 3:16-17, there are many other very appropriate Bible verses for today.

In our liturgy, you've already heard 1 John 3:1 is the promise we often proclaim at baptisms, to help us all claim our new identity: See what love God should have for us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

Or we could have read Romans 8, which we often share at funerals, which proclaims that nothing, including life or death or anything else in all creation, can separate us from God's love.

Or we could have read Psalm 136, with the steady refrain going through the history of God's people: God's steadfast love endures forever.

All of those readings tell us in one way or another that God loves us, everyone, you and me.

But sometimes I wonder if we get the message, and I wonder if those of us who have heard it a lot take it for granted.

* * *

Earlier this month, I spent an hour with my spiritual director, a wise and humble retired pastor, who helps keep me on track. As I was talking about a few challenging situations, he paused and asked me: "Charlie, do you know at the core of your being that God loves you very much?"

His question had nothing specifically to do with the issues I had been sharing and it caught me off guard. But the more I've thought about it, the more I'm grateful for the question and the reminder.

Christmas is as good a time as any to celebrate that God loves us.

- Even when we've said and done foolish things
- Even when we don't read every morning and every evening of our Advent devotional book
- Even when we don't go to church very much
- Even when we do go to church very much, even on Christmas Eve morning, and we sometimes just go through the motions

God continues to love us. And the hope is, that over time that love takes root in us and changes us, it transforms us.

Love is the gift of Christmas. The gift is meant to be opened and used and shared and multiplied.

So we try to welcome God's love and share it. Sometimes we forget and we get our priorities mixed up.

1 Corinthians 13 is another famous Bible reading about love, which is often shared at weddings:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... Love is patient, love is kind. And so on.

1 Corinthians 13 is a reminder that God's love is meant to be shared.

Well there is a Christmas version of 1 Corinthians 13 which seems appropriate for today:

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table, but don't really love my loved ones, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, sing at the nursing home and fill the tree with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, but do not focus on the love of God in Jesus Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child and kiss the spouse.

Love sets aside the decorating to sit and listen and care.

Love is patient and kind, even though stressed and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has perfectly coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, and love doesn't get impatient with those who move a little slower, but rather is thankful for everyone who is present to be in the way.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Even at Christmas.

Love never fails.

Smart phones and other devices will break, earrings will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of love will endure.

Here at Covenant we talk about Learning God's Love and Living God's Love. Our hope is that we really know at the core of our being that God loves us.

We learn God's love, so that we can live God's love—with our families, even when they drive us crazy. With our co-workers and classmates, with neighbors and strangers. With everyone. Thanks be to God for the gift of LOVE.