

December 18, 2016

The National Presbyterian Church

“LOVE”

1 John 4:7-19

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Throughout the season of Advent, over the past three weeks, we’ve been following a series on what we might call “Christmas Gifts” – gifts of character and personal experience that God longs for us to have: internal experiences that overflow to others.

**Three weeks ago**, Evangeline Taylor helped us look at the “Gift of Hope”: the strong belief that the future as a whole, and our future in particular, are in God’s hands.

So many people feel “hopeless,” as if there’s no future, and certainly no control of the future. This can lead to turning inward – to depression. Or to turning out – to grabbing what you can get NOW! . . . in a dog-eat-dog world. But God’s coming to us the first time in Jesus – at just the right time; and God’s promised return at Jesus’ second coming – at just the right time, comprise God’s call for us to believe strongly that the future is his! And therefore ours. And so to have HOPE.

**Two weeks ago** Quinn Fox helped us look at the “Gift of Peace” (focusing especially on Isaiah 11). Peace. Peace first with God, but then Peace translated into peace in our relationships with each other.

Isaiah’s vision of peace includes the image of a lamb lying down with a lion. It’s one thing for us to want peace with other lambs, but if we’re to make true peace, and be at peace with those we think of as lions, well, we’re going to need help for that – from God: from the God who comes to us in Jesus!

**Then, last week** Donna Marsh helped us look at the “Gift of Joy” (focusing on Jesus’ mother Mary in Luke 1). Joy: not the absence of emotional wrestling. Not the trivializing of difficulties. But very much related to hope and peace: the sense that even when life does not go as we planned, will be well; all that happens to us is in God’s redemptive hands.

And while on the one hand these emotions cannot be forced (you cannot force the emotions of joy, or peace, or hope), AT the same time we cannot escape the conundrum or paradox that God actually COMMANDS each of these

- *Hope in the Lord! (Psalm 131:3, a command)*
- *Let the peace of Christ fill your hearts and minds! (Colossians 3:15)*
- *Rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4)*

As if to say, “Don’t wallow! Don’t allow circumstances to win! Remember, the great truth: GOD GIVES WHAT GOD COMMANDS!” These are gifts, we’re to pray for, and expect help with from God

And the same is true with the gift of LOVE – the gift I want us to think about today. The gift of Love.

In fact, this morning, what I want us to do is to think about the Christmas Story as a story of love: a love story that should inspire us, and empower us, to love!

1 John 4:9 says

*God's love was revealed among us in this way:*

***God sent his only Son into the world (the first Christmas) that we might live through him. (i.e., because he loved us and wanted the best for us!)***

1 John 4:11

*If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*

1 John 4:19

*We love (we respond, we determine who we are)*

*because (that first Christmas especially) he first loved us*

It seems, so easy, so natural for us to think of God loving us, and so send his Son! But here's the thing we need to realize – that there was no need for God to do this at all! God could have grown weary and simply thrown his hands up in the air at the mess we've made of our lives and his creation' or at the pain and suffering caused by our selfishness. God could easily have ended it all or simply withdrawn and lost interest! God could have allowed his frustration, or anger, or cynicism to win the day. But he didn't.

Author Madeleine L'Engle, when she was growing up, saw many of her mother's friends doing this – withdrawing, or losing interest.

*When I was in high school and college, I looked at some of my mother's friends, all good Christian church-going women, and thought: 'If this is what it means to be grown up, I don't want it.' They'd closed in, shut down, lost interest in new ideas, went to church to be safe, not challenged.*

[Not her mother though!!]

*She was a remarkable woman, who long before I was born had ridden across the Sahara on a camel and up the Andes on a donkey.*

“Story as Search for Truth,” Radix Vol 2. #2, 1994

And she never lost her sense of adventure – her love of life! And God's like that too, – but with the added dimension that God is not just out for adventure, but enters our world, our mess, even when it's costly, even when it's threatening and deadly!

Perhaps a better analogy is to say that God is like the soldiers storming the beaches and cliffs of Normandy on D-Day – doing it for us, for our safety and freedom, and risking everything! OR like a volunteer fire-fighter entering a burning building in order to save the people inside. There was no need to do it! God could easily have left us to the deadly consequences of our actions. BUT God doesn't.

Instead, God comes to us, steps into our world in love.

- And is born not in a palace, or in a fabulous maternity unit at a modern hospital, but in a barn or a cave or a basement of a house (where the animals were kept)!
- And lives his life, not with the brightest and wealthiest, but with brothers and sisters who think he's lost his mind, and with disciples who often have no clue what he's saying, and then desert him in his moment of need
- And then dies at the hands of those who accuse him unjustly, and beat him up before they subject him to torture.

And he does this FOR US! He dies as a sacrifice for our sin. He carries *all the sin and suffering in the world* in his body on the cross, to bring us back to our senses; to bring us back to the center; to bring us back to God.

So, as 1 John 4:9 says: “**God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world (that first Christmas) that we might live through him.**” AND THEN (the follow up, the corollary) in 1 John 4:11 “*If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*”

And 1 John 4:19, we respond, determine who we want to be: “*We love because he (that first Christmas especially) first loved us.*”

In other words, we’re supposed to let this Christmas story, not only warm our hearts, but change our lives, serving for us as a model, an example to follow:

- to love as he loved
- to take a step into the world *as it is*
- not to be hopeless, or joyless, or peace-less
- not to blame or condemn *others* – which is often our tendency.
- nor to blame or condemn *ourselves* – it can seem so religious to be down on ourselves, but it can also be pernicious, mere self-pity that leads to our being stuck inside our selves, inside own sin or guilt

NO! The Christmas Story, this love story summons us to follow God’s lead and to love by taking a step out of ourselves and into the world as it is.

New Testament scholar, the late William Barclay defined the “love” spoken of in the Bible (the Greek word is *agapé*) in this way:

*Agapé is the spirit which says “no matter what anyone does to me, I will always seek nothing but his/her highest good.” That is, Biblical love is unconquerable benevolence, invincible good will. It is not simply a wave of emotion; it is a deliberate conviction of the mind, issuing in a deliberate policy of the life.*

Barclay, *New Testament Words*, p.22

**John Calvin**, our Presbyterian theological forbear, in the 1500’s (known more for his sharp mind than his touch-feely love) knew this kind of intensely practical, outgoing love. Theologian, Joe Small, writes about his love like this:

Calvin was not interested in an abstract theology that was distant from real life, or even confined within the church. Under Calvin’s leadership, the church in Geneva provided refugee relief and re-settlement, sought jobs for the unemployed, encouraged public education, and worked to provide health care for all. Nothing that contributed to the welfare of the city and its residents seemed insignificant. Calvin even called for a more *economical cooking system for the poor*, and prodded municipal council to construct a *sanitary sewer system* throughout Geneva.

*The Great Ends of the Church* (Louisville, KY, 1997), p. 23.

**SO sometimes** this love to which we are called is to be intensely practical *and may have very little emotional quality to it at all* – we may not even think of it as love: It’s an everyday decision (“invincible good will” and “deliberate conviction”) to follow God’s lead by entering the everyday world *of work and home* and to do what we can – using skills, training, or whatever – to bring order out of chaos, and to help others navigate through life .

Though sometimes, of course, it really is the tender touch of love that matters.

**President Abraham Lincoln** often visited hospitals to talk with wounded soldiers during the Civil War. Once, doctors pointed out a young soldier who was near death and Lincoln went over to his bedside. “*Is there anything I can do for you?*” asked the President.

The soldier obviously didn’t recognize Lincoln, and with some effort he was able to whisper, “*Would you please write a letter to my mother?*”

A pen and paper were provided and the President carefully began writing down what the young man was able to say:

*“My dearest mother, I was badly hurt while doing my duty. I’m afraid I’m not going to recover. Don’t grieve too much for me, please.*

*Kiss Mary and John for me. May God bless you and father.”*

The soldier was too weak to continue, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and added, “Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln.”

The young man asked to see the note and was astonished when he discovered who had written it. “*Are you really the President?*” he asked.

“*Yes, I am,*” Lincoln replied quietly. Then he asked if there was anything else he could do. “*Would you please hold my hand?*” the soldier asked.

*“It will help to see me through to the end.”*

In the hushed room, the tall gaunt President took the boy’s hand in his and spoke warm words of encouragement until death came.

Bits and Pieces Leadership, Vol. F,#3, p.4.

Note: – While there are many historical records of Lincoln’s remarkable visits to soldiers, sometimes at the front, I could not find independent verification of the details of this story.

Lincoln didn’t have to do it, of course. The President didn’t have to go into places of danger to be with his troops. He didn’t have to give up his time and sit beside a bed while more important matters – *at least in some people’s eyes* – needed attention. But he did. He took the step repeatedly.

And we’ve been called to do the same. Not in our own power or strength  
But in God’s. Making it our prayer:

*Lord help me not only know your hope, and peace, and joy in my life!*

*BUT help me to know your love! What you did for me that first Christmas – coming to live with us. And what you continue to do for us – coming to live inside us by your Spirit to empower us.*

1 John 4 says

*God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world (at Christmas) that we might live through him.*

And then

*We love (we respond, determine who we are) because he first loved us*

And then

*If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*  
Following what God did at Christmas, the ball's in our court.

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