

Community Church of Issaquah

December 17, 2023

## The Season of Love

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Today we lit the fourth candle of our Advent Wreath that helps us to focus on the concept of Love. Together we have turned our attention to Hope, Peace, and last Sunday's message on Joy. Each of those has a very special meaning during this time when we anticipate the Birth of Jesus. Oh, I know he was already born centuries ago, so why do we have to dwell on his birthday every year? The truth is, Advent isn't so much about a birthday as it is an opportunity to draw our attention to the coming of Christ and what that has meant to the world – and to you and me. I can't quite picture Jesus sitting at a table surrounded by angels, his parents, his siblings and his disciples waiting for cake. Imagine how many candles he would have to blow out. More than 2000! Trust me, Christmas is nothing like that.

My understanding is that this is a time when God through Jesus wants us to spend time directing our lives to the true meaning of why God sent Jesus in the first place. Let me begin with a passage of Scripture that all of us know by heart. You could even repeat it with me if you wish. It's John 3:16. Do you want to say it with me? It goes like this: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the

world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” That’s the King James Version which most of us are more familiar with. But whatever translation you use or have, the message is the same.

It was when I sat down and began writing this message that I was overwhelmed by the first line of that passage. God so love the world that He gave. . . .” Do you get the deep meaning of that one line. God loved and God gave. In our world today, this is a very real and life-changing idea. If we love, we give. Is that the reason you and I give unto others – family, friends, strangers – because deep down we have a feeling of love? Is that the reason you are giving whatever gifts you have this year to someone? Because you love that person? Perhaps the basis for that entire concept is that when we do love, we want to give. And I don’t only mean wrapped up gifts. There are many other ways to show love by giving.

Let me share a story I read recently that illustrates well what I’m trying to convey to us today. You probably know this actress from movies in the far distant past. Her name is Kathryn Hepburn, and this story is one she wrote in her own words:

*“Once when I was a teenager, my father and I were standing in line to buy tickets for the circus.*

*Finally, there was only one other family between us and the ticket counter. This family made a big impression on me.*

*There were eight children, all probably under the age of 12. The way they were dressed, you could tell they*

*didn't have a lot of money, but their clothes were neat and clean.*

*The children were well-behaved, all of them standing in line, two-by-two behind their parents, holding hands. They were excitedly jabbering about the clowns, animals, and all the acts they would be seeing that night. By their excitement you could sense they had never been to the circus before. It would be a highlight of their lives.*

*The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing proud as could be. The mother was holding her husband's hand, looking up at him as if to say, "You're my knight in shining armour." He was smiling and enjoying seeing his family happy.*

*The ticket lady asked the man how many tickets he wanted? He proudly responded, "I'd like to buy eight children's tickets and two adult tickets, so I can take my family to the circus." The ticket lady stated the price. The man's wife let go of his hand, her head dropped, the man's lip began to quiver. Then he leaned a little closer and asked, "How much did you say?" The ticket lady again stated the price.*

*The man didn't have enough money. How was he supposed to turn and tell his eight kids that he didn't have enough money to take them to the circus?*

*Seeing what was going on, my dad reached into his pocket, pulled out a \$20 bill, and then dropped it on the ground. (We were not wealthy in any sense of the word!) My father bent down, picked up the \$20 bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me, sir, this fell out of your pocket."*

*The man understood what was going on. He wasn't begging for a handout but certainly appreciated the help*

*in a desperate, heartbreaking and embarrassing situation.*

*He looked straight into my dad's eyes, took my dad's hand in both of his, squeezed tightly onto the \$20 bill, and with his lip quivering and a tear streaming down his cheek, he replied; "Thank you, thank you, sir. This really means a lot to me and my family."*

*My father and I went back to our car and drove home. The \$20 that my dad gave away is what we were going to buy our own tickets with. Although we didn't get to see the circus that night, we both felt a joy inside us that was far greater than seeing the circus could ever provide.*

*That day I learnt the value of Giving.*

*The Giver is bigger than the Receiver. If you want to be large, larger than life, learn to Give. Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get - only with what you are expecting to give - which is everything.*

*The importance of giving, blessing others can never be over emphasized because there's always joy in giving. Learn to make someone happy by acts of giving."*

Feelings of love are absolutely important and we must never lose those. One lesson we can learn from the Advent Story though is that love can also be an action – not just feeling something but doing something, by giving something. Love is an act. Giving is the act of loving. Advent begins with God's doing something out of love for His created world. We can actually begin the narrative of the nativity birth of Jesus by John 3:16? God's love for the

whole world was so immense that he took an incredible action. He sent his son Jesus to save us.

Throughout the Scriptures there are more than 100 references to love, and each of them goes beyond the feeling of love and focuses on doing something, on taking action based on those feelings of love. “Love one another as I have loved you” was a way for Jesus to tell his followers to **do** love – care for the poor, widows, exiled, all those who need acts of love, not only speak words. The story of Jesus’s birth is without a doubt the strongest example of God putting his love for us in action. Christmas is the evidence of God’s love put into the action of giving. Pretty amazing, isn’t it?

Another example of the Advent meaning of love might center on the life of a man named Joseph. Here is one who is mentioned only a tiny bit in Scripture, but one of my favorite Bible characters. Following tradition, he was promised in marriage to a young woman from his village. It’s important to understand that Joseph and Mary were not strangers. Their families must have known each other to have arranged their wedding. Even though their marriage was arranged as a part of their tradition, underlying all of that were feelings that led to a act of love. When Joseph learned that this young woman he was supposed to marry was pregnant and he wasn’t the father, he was faced with a very difficult decision.

Joseph listened to the advice of an angel, risking his own reputation, he followed through on his commitment to his promised bride, Mary. He married her, refrained from any

physical relation with her until after the birth of Jesus. Joseph put his deep love for God and Mary into action. The Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph had other children, and that he was a good father for Jesus. I believe that in God's plan for the salvation of the world, Joseph held a very important role. He put his feelings of love into acts of giving – he gave himself.

What about Mary? Here is a young woman in her teens, living an ordinary life in a small village. Then one night an angel came to visit and told her that she was going to get pregnant as a virgin and that she would have a baby who would be the Son of God. You get the connection – God so loved the world that he gave his son. Can you imagine what must have been going through her mind at that time? Fear, anxiety, humility, uncertainty. It must have been so overwhelming for her.

In spite of the complexities of her pregnancy, Mary took all her feelings for God and her child-to-be and put them into action. Traveling as a nine month mother-to-be to the town of Bethlehem as the law required for a census. There she found no warm and comfortable place to be, alone with only her husband to help, she gave birth to God's son, Jesus. It was out of that devotion and amazing love that she and Joseph took the baby Messiah to Egypt for his safety, leaving family and community to honor her promise to God that she would be a faithful mother and follower. Yes, I'm sure that as she held that infant in her arms that first night her heart was overflowing with the feeling of love, and that is the source of her acts of love for the Child of

God. That love was lived in her actions until the time of Jesus's death and after.

Every Advent and Christmas season, the messages of the fruits of the Spirit – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love have come to mean more and more to me as a Christian. As I meditated and looked for inspiration for a meaningful message that I could give you, I was reminded again about the importance of putting love into action. Out of love for someone, we're going to buy a gift, wrap it and place it under a tree. Out of love, we'll share a meal that was prepared for us as a gift of love. Putting our love into action, we'll donate to the needy. A gift of love.

It is from your feelings of love that you reach out that hand to others as you welcome them. It's from that deep feeling of love that you play the piano or play a saxophone or accordion solo, or lead the music, or serve as candle lighter or reader. This is love put into action as a gift that builds this church of love. As Advent comes to a close next Sunday with our Christmas Eve service, my prayer is that we will give continue to others as we put our faith and love into action. Be a giver.

May we have a love filled and Blessed Advent as we practice giving in the name of Jesus.