

December 18, 2022
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Message "What Love? What Love!"

Love. It's the theme of this fourth week of Advent. First there was Hope, then Peace, last week was Joy, and now Love. Love. Ah! It's a word that makes you think of your first infatuation, but love is much more than that. Love is a word that is fraught with meaning. Of course there is puppy love, but there is also the demanding love of having to say no to an unruly teenage child. I've been reading in the paper how dangerous that can be. It seems that some teens don't know how to handle rejection, don't have the skills to deal with it. They wind up assaulting people or property and get themselves into trouble with the law.

And then there is the love that drains every ounce of life from one person as they care for their ailing spouse over an extended period of time. I knew a man who needed medical attention for a deteriorating hip, but he was too busy caring for his wife who was deep in the throes of dementia. So, he ignored his health, even when his hip gave way and his thigh bone shot up into his hip, making that leg 2 inches shorter than the other. He just hobbled around, until he was unable to care for his wife any longer. And then, in love, he faced the difficult decision of placing her in a nursing home because they were better equipped to care for her than he was.

So why is it that when we hear the word love we immediately think of puppy love? The English language is a funny thing. It is a dynamic language, always changing, unlike Latin. It is a language that has many words, and, at the same time, a dearth of words. In Greek there are four words that all get translated into English as one - love. There is a little book written by C.S. Lewis called "The Four Loves" in which he describes the four different Greek words we translate into English as love. They are *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. *Storge* is the love we would identify as affection, especially as it relates to the affection between parent and child. *Philia* is the love we would identify as friendship, or brotherly love. It is the root of the name Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. *Eros* is the love we would identify as sexual love and is the root of the word erotic. Finally, we have *Agape*, which is the love that we would identify as charitable love or the love of God.

When Jesus talks about good news, as far as I can find in the Bible, it is always the good news of the kingdom of God. If anyone can find anywhere in the Bible where Jesus describes the good news as his own death, I'm open to changing my mind. Jesus taught about how radically different the kingdom of God was from the kingdoms of the world. The kingdom of God does not operate the way earthly politics, or economies, or culture work. It is radically different. I believe that the primary difference between the way the kingdom of God operates and the way earthly politics or economies operate is love.

So, what is the love of God? Well, let's start by saying that God is community; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this community of love, there was an over-abundance of love, and no 'other' to love or be loved by, and so we have creation; an 'other' to love and be loved by. But we strayed from a loving relationship, and prophets were sent to tell us the error of our ways. By and large we ignored or killed them. Yet God's yearning to be in relationship with us was so profound that God saw only one option left, enter into time and space and flesh and become one of us, Emmanuel, God with us. Enter into our world, know our joys and our sufferings first hand, and show us how to love as God loves.

And just how does God love? God loves without any demands. God loves without any hidden agenda. God loves without any expectation about debt or repayment. God loves without first calculating the cost of loving, and the cost for God loving us was dear. In his letter to the church in Corinth Paul writes about this love. He says, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

A week today we celebrate God's coming into our world in love, roughly two thousand years ago. The question is, are we up to the task of making it known again in our day?