

“The Advent Conspiracy--Love”

Today we're going to talk about the conspiracy of love. Because Christmas is a love story. A story of love that overthrows pettiness, emptiness, self-hatred, selfishness. Christmas is a love story. **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).**

That's the single most famous passage from the whole Bible. The problem is that love talk is all over our culture and in our music and language. There's so much love-talk, and love-song, out there that I think we almost become numb to it. That makes it all the more important that we talk about it, to shake off our numbness. To really know what love is. I think that for us to really get what love is, we've got to get the flow of love. And for our purposes today, I want to talk about the flow this way: **God loves you; you love you; you love others.**

Some people have a concept of God where God is a police officer waiting to catch you in the act of doing something wrong. Or some people have the idea that God is Judge waiting to sentence you when you've been caught. Some people have a concept of God as a heavenly father who is a lot like their earthly father. He might have been kind of absent, too busy, disengaged, or angry.

Through the Old Testament to the New Testament we see a progressive understanding of who God is that culminates in Jesus. In him we finally see that God is love. We see passages like this from 1 John, **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).** According to John, the defining attribute of God's character is love, because God is love.

Now, here's something that's interesting to me. The words for love in the Old and New Testaments have nothing to do with an emotion. The words for love in the Bible all describe actions. The main word for love in the New Testament, agape, is primarily used to talk about sacrificial love. That I'm going to put your needs before my own. In fact, when we get to the word that the Bible uses to describe God's love for us in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, the word is “agape.” The self-giving of God. So the idea of love being tied into action, into self-giving, is central to the idea of love and central to the character and nature of God.

To love is to give and it's God's nature to give. So John in 1John 4 says this: **“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).**

God loved us, he sought to save us from ourselves, from death, from fear. He sought to redeem us as his people. He sought to bring about our wellbeing by giving himself, by being willing to suffer for us. This is what God's character is, this is what love is.

So Christmas is a love story. It's the story of a God who loves human kind so much that he's willing to pour himself into human flesh, to walk among us, to show us love. Ultimately to show us love by laying down his life for us. It's a love story.

It's hard, sometimes, for us to really wrap our minds what that kind of love feels like and looks like, but every once in a while God gives us some clues, some indicators, glimpses of unconditional love. Glimpses of a love that says, “No matter what you've done, I love you, you are mine, I formed you in your mother's womb, and I love you.” Some people say they get a glimpse of God's unconditional love from their dogs. I wouldn't know about that because I have a cat, and cats must just seem disgusted with human beings.

Anyway, I think one of those glimpses I get of God's unconditional love is from my kids. Zoe used to do this when she was little but now she's and she's more independent and reserved. But Abby is still of the age where she doesn't hold back her love. When I walk in she almost always runs to me and hugs me and yells, “Daddy!” And it doesn't matter if I preached well that day, or didn't do a good job that day, it doesn't matter. The love just pours out. That's a glimpse, through my kids, of unconditional love. A glimpse of the extravagant, wonderful, love of God.

A little story illustrates this. A holy man was praying one morning. He's sitting at the base of tree on a river bank. The roots of the tree stretched down into the water. As he prayed the holy man noticed a scorpion was caught in the roots and about to drown. He crawled out onto the roots and reached down to set the scorpion free, but every time he reached out to it, it tried to sting him.

Another man can walking along and saw what was happening. He said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion and it's in its nature to want to sting you?!" The holy man replied, "That may well be, but it's in my nature to save, and I won't change my nature because the scorpion doesn't change its nature."

Even if you've been a scorpion all your life toward God, that doesn't change God's nature toward you because his love is a covenantal love that is steadfast, unmovable. God's love is a love that is not contingent even on you loving him back.

For Christians the ultimate sign of God's love is when Jesus gave his life on the cross. The Romans at that time looked at the cross as a sign of execution. For us it's the sign of the depth of God's love. How much does he love us? And he stretches out his arms and says, "I love you this much. I love you enough to suffer for you. I love you enough to die for you. I love you this much." Jesus said, "**Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends**" (John 15:13). We look at the cross and see his love. It's a sign, a reminder to us of the extravagant love of God.

So if we want to understand love we've got to get this part, God loves us. Even when you lash out at him, or turn your back on him, or neglect him, he loves you. That's the first part of the flow, and I believe the next part of the flow is you loving you. **God loves you; you love you; you love others.**

Now, not everybody struggles with this part, but don't tune me out, because somebody you know struggles with this so maybe this will help you understand them.

It's important for you to love yourself and here's why: Because if you don't think you're worthy of God's love, or the love others, then how on earth are you going to share love with others?! In his book *Blue Like Jazz* Donald Miller talks about time recently when this hit home with him. He was having trouble with his girlfriend and after trying to work it out she finally had to tell him it was over. The problem, he said, was that he could never believe her when she expressed love to him. He didn't think he was worthy of love. He said he would kick himself around in his head, call himself a loser and that sort of thing. It kept him from fully engaging in the relationship. Finally she couldn't take it and ended it. Wrote him a letter saying that if he couldn't love himself, he couldn't receive any love from her.

After he read her letter he said he just wandered around his apartment not knowing when he was going to explode in sobs and tears. He didn't know what else to do so he started cleaning his bathroom. That's when the voices really started shouting at him in his head telling him that he was as disgusting as the urine he was cleaning off the wall around the toilet.

Then, he said, it hit him. A sentiment that he was sure was the voice of God. The sentiment was simple: "**Love your neighbor as you love yourself**" (Luke 10:27). He realized God was speaking to his heart. Don realized that he would never talk to his neighbor the way he talked to himself. He had come to believe that it was wrong to kick other people around but it was okay to do it to himself.

He said it was like God put him in an airplane and flew him over himself so he could see all the connections, all the neighborhoods that were falling apart because he would not let himself receive love from himself, from others and from God. Because he couldn't receive love, he couldn't give love and that kept so much from happening.

For some people, this is not an issue. For others it is. I'm one of those people. I got a call last week from an friend who lives out of state. He and his family were members years ago. He talked about how much I had meant to him and his family and how their lives were different, better, because of my friendship. And I have to admit, that one of my first thoughts was, "If he only really knew me, he wouldn't say something that nice, he wouldn't love me like that." If you're like me then you've got to be reminded over and over, because it's easy to forget. God has said unequivocally, without a doubt, he loves you. Now you love you. Because if you can't love you, you start hoarding love, you start treating other people like you treat yourself. And that can be so destructive. Love yourself so you can get down to the business of you loving others.

This is where we practice the conspiracy of love. We overthrow superficial understanding about love and really love others. This is the challenging stuff. Jesus said, "**I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you**" (Luke 6:27-28). This radical love means we love our enemies, we find ways to do good things to them. We seek out ways to bless them.

One of the things we have to confront is that we treat love like a commodity. We use love like money. If somebody is doing something for us, offering us something—gifts, time, popularity, whatever—we feel like they have value, they're worth something to us. With love we withhold affirmation from people who don't agree with us, but we lavishly finance the ones who do.

I've used love like money, but listen love doesn't work like money. It's not a commodity. When we barter with it, we all lose. The call is for us to love everybody as if they are the most important people on earth. When we treat love like money, if somebody does not fit into our idea of what a person should be, they are somehow of less value. That's when we get it wrong.

A good friend of mine invited one of his employees to church a few months ago. A young guy that was searching, looking, he had spiritual questions and was open. So my friend invited him to church and the guy came. I'm not sure which service it was but he came ready to experience God. It was a communion Sunday and he got up and took communion. And as he went back to his seat somebody saw the front of his T-shirt. It had skulls or some other kind of graphic on it like that. And somebody said loud enough for him to hear, "I can't believe he'd wear that to church." I don't know who said that, but you don't ever have to worry about seeing that T-shirt again, because that young man said that he will never be back in this church. Oh, and the irony is that it was a Sunday that pastor Mark had just finished talking about hospitality and how we are to welcome people!

That's treating love like money. We all lose when we treat love like money. "If you agree with me, if you dress like I think you should, or speak like I think you should, or smell like I think you should, then I'll pay you some of my love. But that's not really love. The advent conspiracy is about overturning that way of thinking.

Listen, we can move toward real love if we're not there yet. Instead of treating love like a commodity we dispense when people meet certain criteria, we can shift our ways of thinking and live so that we treat everybody as though they are the coolest, the most important, the most famous people on the planet.

Sometimes we get it right. Debbie England emailed me a couple of weeks ago and said I could share her story. She said that she and her husband had tried to be active in a church, but ended up just kind dropping out until about 6 months ago when they found Saint Paul's. She shared with me that they've been struggling in lots of different ways, one of which was whether to call this their church home. She said that Saint Paul's is such a big church and it's a long ways from where they live, and they just wondered if they could feel cared about here like they had in a small church years ago. She wrote, "The last 2 weeks have been very hard on us..things just happened all at once...the domino affect in a bad way.....our faith was tested..." She said, "We walked into church [and were greeted] with smiles more than ever..." Then she said the music that day just really had an impact on her heart. It was exactly what they needed. She writes, I "thought I saw it all till leaving the service I was wiping away some stressful tears and this lady put her arm around me and said 'don't worry it will be ok.....' I had to thank her a couple of times for just hugging me..and hugged her even more thanking her (sorry we held up the line out)." She didn't know this person but she says, "I felt like someone cared and didn't even know why they were doing it they just did...thank you for the hug...it made my whole day different..."

Really loving others takes a shift in our thinking. And it shifts our actions. And it changes people's lives. God's love changes us so we are able to love other people. If you operate with a deficit of love, and you're not sure if you are loved, then you're afraid to give love because how can you give away something you're not sure you have enough of? You worry, what if there's not enough for me. When you draw love from the deep wells of God's love and you know that it never runs out, then you're not afraid anymore to give love away, because you know there's always more for you and plenty for everyone else.

Back to John's letter in the Bible where he says, "**Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us**" (1 John 4:11-12). No one has ever seen God. The only way people see God is when they see the love of God shining through us. We, by how we love, point to God's love.

So what does that love look like? It's different for different people. Sometimes it looks like a hug, when you're hurting and wonder if anybody cares.

Sometimes love looks like simply listening to somebody, maybe your elderly neighbor who doesn't get many visitors or phone calls. You're busy and on the go and you see him or her at the mailbox. They long to have some simple human contact. Maybe you make a sacrifice to take that time, to have that cup of coffee, even when your life is full and busy.

Maybe love looks like a note that you handwrite to somebody to let them know that you love them, that you're there for them, that you care. Maybe that's how you bless somebody and give them the gift of love.

Sometimes it has more to do with the practical side of life. My dad and his wife were down last weekend and we celebrated our Christmas early with them. One of the gifts we gave them was actually not for them. In their honor we bought a water filter to be sent to Haiti. Haiti has been hit so hard as you know. The devastating earthquake a year ago. Then they were hit by storms and then political unrest. Then came a cholera epidemic. People are dying needlessly because they don't have clean water to drink or cook with or bath in. Or they end up spending what little money they do have to treat cholera instead of on food or other necessities.

I came across an initiative to send simple water filters to Haiti. It's a filter that doesn't use chemicals, or have any mechanical parts. It uses gravel and sand and a natural bacteria that kills the harmful bacteria. It costs \$34 through the one of our Methodist agencies and Rotary International will match every filter purchased with one more. In fact, the staff here at Saint Paul's has agreed that we're not going to get each other Christmas presents this year, instead we'll be sending what we would have spent to buy water filters. So about 10 families in Haiti will have clean water soon. Sometimes love looks like a water filter.

Sometimes it looks like a mosquito net in Africa. The nothing but nets campaign provides mosquito nets to families. These nets reduce malaria transmittal by almost 50%. \$10 buys a net that several people can sleep under, and saves lives. Sometimes love looks like a mosquito net.

If you're still doing some Christmas shopping for the person who has everything, maybe instead you get something for someone who just needs clean water, or a net to sleep under.

Sometimes love looks like a gift basket or a food basket from a church the week of Christmas...

Sometimes it looks like a coat, or gloves, or new underwear...

Sometimes, for a kid, it looks like a man or woman who gives an hour a week to have lunch at their school, or to help them learn to read...

For the people in our adopted village of Los Rosas in Nicaragua, it looks like the school they attend and the teachers they have, or the daily meal that the kids get, or the doctor that visits each week, or the microloans they get to start home-based business and become self sustaining. All that can happen because we give \$20,000 a year.

I was talking with a friend last week. He and his wife are empty-nesters. Or they were. That is until they found out about a family that was living in squalid conditions, essentially being held hostage by a landlord. They took that family, a young couple and their 4 kids, one of which has cerebral palsy, into their home for the time being. Sometimes, that's what love looks like...

This Friday at Christmas Eve I want to prepare you. We'll have a special offering and all of it will go to help people locally and around the world in some of the ways I just described. All of it will be turned into some form of love.

When Jesus was asked what was most important, what was the core of existence, he laid it out simply and directly. He said it's this, "Love God with all of who you are, and love others as you love yourself."

Love is not a sappy emotion. Real love gets lived out in real ways in the real world. Christmas is a love story. God loves you, you love you, you love others. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Donald Miller for his thoughts on love from his book [Blue Like Jazz](#). I also thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his thoughts on love.