

Sermon for December 4 2005

Advent Love

I want to begin this morning's sermon by showing you this glove. At the moment it is limp and lifeless. But as I place it on my hand it fills out. As I flex my hand the glove begins to move and is filled with life as I direct it.

As we think of this lifeless glove becoming animated, this is a picture of the Christian life. We believe that in Jesus Christ God came to earth to slip into the gloves of human lives. He came to fill them out so they would pulsate with life ... so they could be and do things, which by themselves they were powerless to accomplish.

Scripture says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory; glory as of the only Son from the Father ... And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16). Paul says, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10). And when Paul prays for the church in Ephesus he writes: "And to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

Ludvig Lindeman wrote a song with this concept in the second verse:

Not in our temples made with hand
God, the almighty is dwelling;
High in the heavens his temple stands,
All earthly temples excelling;
Yet he who dwells in the Heaven above
Deigns to abide with us in love,
Making our bodies his temple.

Being filled with God is a central theme of Scripture. And if we narrow this theme down even more, the Bible tells us that to be filled with the love of God is at the very centre of the Christian story. This morning we are going to think about Advent Love as we continue to reflect upon the four words of Advent: Hope, love, peace and joy.

As Christians who take time to mark the season of Advent we are a people of hope. This is the word I discussed last week. This hope finds expression in the wonderful promise expressed in this morning's psalm. It is a picture of what the universe will be like after Christ returns. It is of course also a wonderful depiction of what heaven is like right now. All of creation will be full of his love. The psalm describes this love in the following way:

85:10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

85:11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

85:12 The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

85:13 Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

This is a vivid expression of what eternity will be like and all of God's creation after the Second Coming. There will be fullness of life and love. As Advent people we have our hope set on the fulfillment of this promise. But because we live in the world where this promise is not yet fulfilled we are to cultivate in our relationships now this character of love and faithfulness.

St. Peter in the passage we heard read from his second letter was needing to encourage people who were beginning to wonder, Is the Second Coming for real? Is there anything to hope for?

In attempting to answer these questions he says yes Christ will return. But what seems to us like a delay in his return is not seen so by God. As a caring and loving pastor he encourages them with these words:

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 3:9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Here Peter is saying that God is not slow to come but steadfast and faithful because he desires for all people to come to repentance. He also quotes the words of Jesus and warns us that when he does come it will be suddenly. Another translation expresses this verse in the following way:

But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.

Peter is crystal clear. The Lord's coming will be sudden and everything will be exposed to the judgment of God. With the second coming in view he encourages and exhorts us to live our lives now filled with the Lord's presence just as this glove is filled with my hand.

14 And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God.

St. Augustine once said that "Love God and do what you want". The more we choose to love God the more pure and blameless our lives will be because our love for God will deepen. With his love filling our lives we will move directed by his motion and will live out lives in ways that are more pure and in keeping with his good and perfect will.

On this second Sunday in Advent we are called to open our hearts and minds to receive in a fresh and new way the love of Jesus Christ. Let us intentionally empty ourselves of all that presently fills us as fallen people and let the love of Christ more fully fill the empty space so that we overflow in our work and witness as God's covenant people.

The Bible clearly explains that we are not to copy the world's model but that our "love" is to be characterized like the love Jesus demonstrated in countless ways and examples when he was on this earth.

Jesus takes all that had been said and known about love and gives it a whole new dimension and direction. He says, "I want you to love one another as I have loved you." Not as the world, but as I have loved you. It wasn't a love based on reciprocity. It was not at all like the love of the couple where the woman asked:

"Darlin', you say you love me," she said. "But would you be willing to die for me?"

"No," he explained. "Mine's what they call an un-dying type of love."

Worldly love often likes to hedge its bets as is reflected in these two stories:

The sixty-five year old man told his new bride in her forties, "Darling, I figure I'll die before you. So I want to tell you about my investments and property - and the insurance policy

I took out some time ago. It's a \$1,000,000 policy.

"Darling, I hate talking about such things," said the bride.

"But tell me, is your policy a straight life policy or does it carry a double indemnity clause in case of accident?"

Then there was the young suiter who said to his beloved:

I'm not like that Jim Higgins. I'm not rich; I don't own lakefront property; I don't have several cars; I don't vacation in Hawaii every year. But I tell you from the bottom of my heart, that all my love is yours."

"Oh, I know," said his fiancée, "but while we're discussing these things, maybe you could tell me a little more about Jim Higgins?"

Jesus gives an entirely new dimension and direction to our understanding and definition of love. It is at the point of Christian love that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is most radical and revolutionary, because the "Love" that Christ embodied in word and deed is foreign and contrary to our natural human and sinful nature. If we could only remove the story of Adam and Eve from the Bible, the Bible would be reduced to a book of moral niceties. However, the Adam and Eve story demonstrates for us that we are in the midst of great spiritual struggle and warfare. This struggle is an ongoing historical reality every day of our lives.

Gabriel Marcel, the well-known French writer and religious thinker, once said, "To love someone is to say, you will not die." Why? Because to love truly is to love forever.

Dr. James Denny, the famous Scottish theologian and preacher used to stand before the people and hold up a crucifix and say, "God loves like this."

Do you know there is nothing in us, or in this universe, that says God must be gracious and merciful or that His love must be everlasting. "Why does God love?" you ask then. There is only one right answer. Because it is His nature to love.

I John 4:10 declares: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us." There is for humankind no way to God except the way made known by God's self-giving of love in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther opened up a new arena of Christian thought when he discovered that God's power is the power of His love. We do not act, but we are acted upon.

Therefore to love in the Christian tradition is a challenge, because we must sacrifice our wants for the greater good. This is not easy to do. Let me share a real life story which describes beautifully the point I want to make.

Joni Earickson Tada told of an incident in the Los Angeles Special Olympics. Her husband Ken was the track and field coordinator. The contestants lined up for the fifty-yard dash. Among those at the starting blocks was a Down's syndrome girl with thick glasses and a short, stocky, mentally handicapped boy in baggy gray shorts.

Ken sounded the starting gun and the six contestants were off and running. Some skipped, a few stumbled, but each moved toward the finish line. All of a sudden, one of the runners skipped the curb of the track and began running toward some of his friends in the infield.

Ken blew his whistle to redirect the boy, but he didn't pay any attention. At that point, the girl in the thick glasses noticed the boy's detour so she stopped a few yards from the finish line and called to her friend in the infield, "Hey, come this way." The boy heard her voice and turned around. She said again, "Hey, come this way." The friend just stood there. So she ran toward him

and gave him a big hug when she caught up with him. They linked elbows and together got back onto the track and finished the race arm in arm.

That night as Ken and Joni were discussing the event, Ken explained what happened is a beautiful description of Christian love. He said, "She set aside her goal in order to help a confused friend reach the finish line." That's what love is, to set aside our desires in order to help someone else fulfill theirs.

Secondly, to love in the Christian tradition and way of life requires commitment. Newspaper columnist and minister, *George Crane*, tells of a wife who came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me."

Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan. "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him."

With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!" And she did it with enthusiasm. Acting "as if."

For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing. When she didn't return, Crane called. "Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?" "Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered I really do love him." Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. The ability to love is established not so much by fervent promise as by repeated deeds.

Our commitment to love in the Christian faith is to believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. When we do this, all relationships, including marital ones, can be transformed.

Thirdly, to love in the Christian tradition is a challenge because to love is very costly. C. S. Lewis wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your

heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken." Then he concluded, "The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the danger of love is hell."

Love is relational--personal and interpersonal. It involves risk and a willingness to be vulnerable. In relationships there is usually a price to pay. When we love, what hurts another hurts us; what brings them sorrow brings us tears. What causes them anxiety makes our hearts beat faster. If you want to be safe from pain, don't love. But if you want to be human, go ahead and accept the fact that you have to love, even though love is costly.

There is a Gaelic legend that demonstrates the costly but persuasive power of love. The legend tells about an Eagle swooping down and carrying a small baby to its lofty nest on the high mountain. Many skilled and professional climbers tried to scale the high and rugged terrain, but each failed at the difficult task. The child's future seemed doomed. As one of the climbers was coming down the mountain, he noticed a small, frail woman attempting the climb. She struggled and struggled. Slowly but surely she climbed to the steepest part of the cliff. Soon she was observed bringing the small infant back to the base of the mountain. The skilled climbers asked in amazement, "How did you do it?" She simply replied, "I am the baby's mother." Her love allowed her to push past the limits of her frail body. To love is to be willing to pay the cost; to decide not to love is to pay the highest cost of all. Love is a costly commitment, not mere convenience.

Lastly, to love at all is to have experienced the grace of God. We can't share what we haven't experienced or refused to experience. A preacher named Steve Brown, tells the story of adopting a German Shepherd he later named Calvin. The problem with the dog, Steve said, was that his first owner mistreated and beat the dog. Every time he tried to pat him, Calvin would run or cower on the floor, waiting to be hit harshly. Steve Brown then shared, "I tried to tell him I would never hit him. I tried to explain to him that I loved him and that he was now a part of the Brown family and that Browns didn't hit upon Browns. I tried to convince him that I was different than his previous owner. But Calvin would have none of it. I was a cruel, angry, mean master, and nothing would change his mind."

One of the things the vet told Steve about Calvin was that you could tell a lot about a dog owner by examining the dog. (That's how he knew Calvin had been beaten by the previous owner.) If you judged Jesus by some of His

followers, you would think Jesus must be some kind of horrible person. If you are a believer and you haven't seen the reality of a benevolent God, you haven't changed owners. Once you belonged to Satan. Don't let the patterns you developed under him continue under the new owner. The New Owner loves you. Just look and see.