

12/22/2019

“Love . . . Gotta Have It”

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; (1 Thessalonians. 3:12-13)

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Series: “Sharing in a Life-Giving Christmas”

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we continue our series of messages on Sharing in a Life-Giving Christmas, learning what it means for us to experience it, and how we can share that wonderful experience with others.

In our first week we considered “Hope . . . life can be different.” In our second week we considered Peace . . . from above and within.” Last week we considered “Joy . . . to get through the tough days.”

Today our attention is turned to love. . . acknowledging that it is something everyone must have. Although we may not want or need much else for Christmas or any other time, the human soul just cannot do without love.

As the scripture affirms, and as I believe we know deep within our hearts, **without love we are nothing.**

The whole of the New Testament, beginning with the Gospel According to John, points to and sums up the centrality of love being at the core of God’s purpose for the birth of Jesus Christ.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .” John 3:16

Matthew’s gospel account describes the conception and birth of Jesus, born of God’s love.

Mary's desire to serve the Lord with love allowed the Christ child to be conceived within her. And Joseph's good heart and humble obedience to God's will at least in part made him the one God chose to be the earthly father of Jesus.

When we think about a Life-giving Christmas, one which describes for us the very essence of life, we cannot forget or omit love. It is something essential to the human psyche and soul.

Yet we know that it is experienced in many forms and types of relationships. And at this time of year especially, there are many expectations of love associated with those relationships.

As Rev. N. Neelley Hicks writes: "As we focus on love, it is important to recognize the different forms of love. At this time of year, relational expectations are at an all-time high. Whether it is family, romantic or communal love, people want to feel acceptance and reassurance.

God, through Christ, has done just that – accepted humanity and assured it with life that does not end. Not just any life, but life abundant with the things that matter. And when this physical life ends, a new life begins. What greater love is there? This is the kind of love that we want to convey today and throughout the year." (1)

From the time we are greeted at the door to the time we leave, our experience at church, in the body of Christ, is meant to be a sharing in the Life-giving love of Jesus.

And when we go forth from this place into our homes or into the world, we carry forth that Spirit of Christ's love with us . . . in our hearts and in our lives.

We know how important it is for us to show and share that love with others in this world, for that is the embodiment of our mission. As we seek to introduce people to Jesus Christ, whether or not we express his love will largely determine what they believe about him.

As you may recall from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:1-3), he puts the priority of love very well:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if **I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing**. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

>> **Love . . . gotta have it – both for ourselves and to share it with others.**

Paul goes on to give perhaps the best description of love found in the bible or anywhere else:

¹CO 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

When I hear these words in the context of this season, I think about Joseph and Mary; their love for God, their love for each other, and their love for Jesus, even yet unborn.

“Follow the way of love,” Paul instructs. (14:1)

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And in his letter to the Christians in Rome, he writes:

RO 12:9 **Love must be sincere.** Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly (and sisterly) love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

All of which is good advice to any who wish to experience a life-giving Christmas – and even beyond.

Stephen Smith of Texas shared his witness in The Upper Room (12/20/15):

“A few years ago, my family encountered tough times. We totaled our only car; my wife needed abdominal surgery; I had just lost my job. Christmas was fast approaching, and an empty Christmas tree was a constant reminder of our difficulties. Then a woman at our church approached me one cold, gray December afternoon. She whispered, “A person where I work would like to help you and your family.” I didn’t know what to say. “Just say yes,” she said.

After Bible study, this same woman drove us home. In our driveway she popped the car trunk to reveal black plastic bags stuffed with gaily-wrapped presents. Over the next several weeks she brought us dozens of gifts along with envelopes of cash that we sorely needed in our financial stress.

Remembering such warmth and love brings tears to my eyes even now. Our anonymous benefactor showed us what love is. Love is giving without expecting anything in return. Our human love holds back nothing as it honors God by trying to imitate the love that God has for all of us.”

Friends, the outpouring of God’s love is being shared in generous ways with others through our congregation this season. For me, God’s love is at the very heart of it.

So when you may find yourself stretched to the limit, **remember God’s love for you** in Christ Jesus. When you feel your patience wearing thin at home, on the road, in the stores or elsewhere, **remember God’s loving patience for you and for others.** When the voice of doubt and judgement leads you to believe the worst in someone, **listen to the voice of God’s love and grace instead.** When you see someone in need or hurting and alone, **open your heart to receive them in the spirit of God’s love.**

How will you seek to do these things? Be open and responsive to God’s word, as Joseph and Mary were. Consider the moving video we saw earlier.

As you enter into the Christmas Season and the New Year, remember the hope that with God

all things are possible, that life can always be different for the better. Seek the peace of God from above and within. Feel the joy of the Lord, which gives strength to make it through the tough days.

And focus on the love of God, for yourself and others, which came into this world as a little baby so long ago.

And may the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone!

1. (A Life Giving Christmas: Week Three; RETHINK CHURCH, 2010)