

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

December 13, 2009

Rev. Susan M. Fleenor, Pastor

3rd Sunday of Advent

ADVENT SERIES: 3. THE GIFT OF LOVE

Psalm 136 I John 4:7-13 John 13:31-35

In this season of Advent we have been unwrapping some special gifts that are ours in Jesus who came first as a babe in a manger, and as our resurrected Lord is coming again with power and glory. We've unwrapped and contemplated the gifts of hope and joy. Let's now unwrap and contemplate the gift of love.

The biblical story is a story of God's love. Out of love God created the universe – worlds and creatures of all kinds. Out of love God called a people by name and saved them from slavery in Egypt and was with them as they made their way through the wilderness to the promised land. When they forgot God and were taken captive in a foreign land God did not forget them, promising through the prophet Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bear a son whose name would be known as “Emmanuel”, God with us and how this special child would save and deliver his people. In our celebration of Christmas and then Easter we believe this promise came true. Jesus is God's gift of love to us. Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. Mother Teresa described the ethic of love in this way: “I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.” God does not command us to “grow in intelligence” or to “grow in power.” Since the very core of the universe is love, then God through Christ commands us to grow in love.

We hear words of “love” often in John's writings. Jesus says, “As I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Love is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Love is the defining sign of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Love is the measure of our faithfulness. The Apostle Paul wrote one of the most beautiful odes to love found in either secular or religious literature that gives a picture into the character and nature of love that Jesus speaks of. It is found in what's known as the love chapter in I Corinthians 13 and is often read at weddings.

Let me share with you the words of the Apostle Paul concerning love in a fresh way that seems appropriate with Christmas just a couple of weeks away.

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family,
I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return
but rejoices in giving to those who can't,

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. Video games will break, pear necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. But giving the gift of love will endure.

(Author Unknown)

The past two Sundays I have offered lots of suggestions as to how you might nurture hope and peace in your lives. What about love? Love is not something that we just fall into, as the romantic songs suggest. Love is a spiritual practice which means we can increase our capacity to love. So let me offer some suggestions to help cultivate love in our lives. The suggestions are similar to the ones I offered to cultivate hope and joy in your lives, so they will have a familiar ring.

1. When you are not feeling particularly loved by God, meditate on one of many assurances from scripture that affirm God's love for you. For me it would be a favorite verses from Romans, "Nothing in all of creation can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Say it with me.)
2. When you are finding it difficult to love someone and unable to call upon God's help in prayer, try a breath prayer. Breathe in and say, "God is love" and breathe out and say, "I can love." (Let's practice.) Or breathe in and say, "God is love," and breathe out and say, "I am loved." (Let's practice.)

3. When you are unable to be present to another who is in need of love and strength, try the Quaker practice of “holding someone in the light”. Visualize that person in the circle of God’s love and presence. Who might that be for you at this moment? Let’s pause for a brief moment of silence and hold someone in the light; see that person in the circle of God’s love and presence.
4. Bring to heart and mind the persons who have mentored you in the way of love. How is love expressed in them? How do they cultivate love? If that person is still living send them a Christmas card that expresses how grateful you are for the ways they have mentored you in the way of love. If that person is not living, find a quiet time to light a candle and take a moment to remember them in prayer with thanksgiving.
5. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. Whenever you feel that fear is keeping you from expressing, extending love, go wash your hands, saying, “I am washing away my fears so I can love.” (Or remember your baptism.)
6. The living of life itself is a course on love. And one of the things we may learn along the way is that love is hard work, especially if the person you love does not love themselves, does not value their own lives and relationships. In times like this I would encourage you lay down the burden of loving at the feet of Jesus. Hear Jesus say to you, “Come unto me, all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” When loving another has become a burden, it’s okay to lay the burden down, to let Jesus carry it for awhile, and once you’ve rested to pick up the call to love again.
7. Of course, the world of music provides us with a smorgasbord of songs that nurture us in the way of love. When you need to be reminded that you are loved and are called to love, sing loud and strong a favorite song about love. It could be “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No not just for some but for everyone” (sing) or how about the Beatles, “All you need is love (bu, bu, bu, bu), all you need is love (bu, bu, bu, bu), all you need is love, love is all you need.”
8. Occasionally, someone will stop by the church in need of help – some gas money or to pay for a prescription. Thanks to your support of the Deacon’s offering I am able to provide \$20 or so to meet their immediate need. When I present this help, I say something like this: “This gift is a sign of God’s love for you. Down the road when you have the opportunity to help someone please don’t hesitate to help and thus pass on God’s love.”

It's called paying it forward. Actually, there is a wonderful movie starring Kevin Spacey called "Pay It Forward". Rent it sometime and be inspired in the way of love.

9. Another way to cultivate love in your life is to be a sign of God's love anonymously. Going on for a year now, Lynn and I have been receiving every few months an unexpected gift. It arrives by mail in a non-descript envelope with no return address. Tucked between a folded piece of white paper with the words "In Gratitude" printed on it will be a \$50 bill or a \$100 bill. The source of the gift is a mystery, although our assumption is that the giver is a part of our Knox family. Although we will never be able to express our gratitude to this unknown person face to face, we are grateful for their generous sign of God's love. It inspires us to anonymously express our gratitude in gifts to others and thus grow in love.
10. A favorite children's book of mine is *The Runaway Bunny* (by Margaret Wise Brown with pictures by Clement Hurd.) It testifies to a mother's unconditional love for her child and for me that mother is God and the child is you or me.. Cultivate love in your life by reading this book to a child of God in your life – be it yourself, your life partner, your children or grandchildren, no matter how old they are. (Read *The Runaway Bunny*)

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, "I am running away." "If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."

"In you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you." "If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny, "I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you." "If you become a rock on the mountain high above me," said his mother, "I will be a mountain climber, and I will climb to where you are."

"If you become a mountain climber," said the little bunny, "I will be a crocus in a hidden garden," "If you become a crocus in a hidden garden," said his mother, "I will be a gardener. And I will find you."

“If you are a gardener and find me,” said the little bunny, “I will be a bird and fly away from you.” “If you become a bird and fly away from me,” said his mother, “I will be a tree that come home to.”

“If you become a tree,” said the little bunny, “I will become a little sailboat and I will sail away from you.” “If you become a sailboat and sail away from me,” said his mother, “I will become the wind and blow you where I want you to go.”

“If you become the wind and blow me,” said the little bunny, “I will join a circus and fly away on a flying trapeze.” “If you go flying on a flying trapeze, I will be a tightrope walker, and I will walk across the air to you.”

“If you become a tightrope walker and walk across the air,” said the bunny, “I will become a little boy and run into a house.” “If you become a little boy and run into a house,” said the mother bunny, “I will become your mother and catch you in my arms and hug you.”

“Shucks,” said the bunny, “I might just as well stay where I am be your little bunny,” And so he did. “Have a carrot,” said the mother bunny.

Friends, let us unwrap again the gift of God’s love in this season of Advent and Christmas. Let us affirm that we are loved beyond measure in God’s gift of love in Jesus the Christ Child and our Risen Lord. As signs of our identity as disciples of Jesus let us grow in love of one another.

Let us pray.

Good and Gracious God, your love for us in Christ Jesus is boundless. Help us to receive fully this gift of love and to love as we are loved. Bless our desire to grow in the way of love, in relation to our family and friends, to strangers and enemies, and especially those whom the world sees as unlovable. May loving you with our whole hearts, minds, and souls and our neighbor as ourselves be our greatest hope, joy, and treasure. Amen.

