

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 3,4 "God's Christmas Gifts - Love"

Christmas is about giving, when we remember what God gave us in sending his Son. Jesus brought us many gifts, and we will be looking during Advent and Christmas at *Love, Joy, Peace, Hope*.

Today the gift is *love*. What *is* love, exactly? We use the word in many ways - I love my wife, I love my sons, I love my dog; I love this church, I love Long Island, I love summer; I love peach ice cream, I love dark chocolate. All are different "loves," all touch different parts of who I am, all evoke different feelings and behaviors. So what's *God's* love? The Bible also knows of several kinds of love - people who love their stomachs, people who love money, people who love their friends, people who are erotically drawn to someone else, people who sacrifice their lives for others.

1) *God Is Love*

When the Bible says "*God is love*," which love do you think it means? Not that he has warm feelings towards us, not that he is our friend or our lover, but that he is concerned for our welfare, even at expense to himself. "*God so loved... that he gave...*" is the formula: he does whatever it takes to secure our well-being, and to put back to rights his world and his people who have fallen into such a mess. He made us, he cares for us, he wants to see us

flourish, and he is working at remaking us and his world.

What does that mean to you and me, this Advent? That there is someone who really loves us; loves us in a way that nobody else quite does. And we need that sort of love. Everyone knows that without love we wither away. Show me an infant who is not loved in its earliest months, and I will show you an adult with troubles beyond measure. Show me a child who has been abused or neglected and I will show you adult mental illness and self-destructive behavior.

How many women have sat in my office and told me they don't feel loved by their husbands? They are like ships passing in the night who occasionally bump into each other, but there is no affection, no consideration, no sense of being cared for. He may work 60 hours a week and bring home good money to support his family, but his wife feels like a widow. How many women learned from their mothers that love is about working 'til you drop, or realize that this is really about control?

How many men have I talked to who feel they were never loved by their fathers, and so have never learned to express love to their sons or daughters or wives? Why has our society made it impossible for men to speak of feelings, or express them in ways that

communicate? How many men suffer deeply when their sons and daughters go off to college, but can't even talk about it to their wives?

How many of us deeply need to feel loved, noticed, wanted, valued, respected, affirmed, comforted, shared with..? How large a hole there is at the center of so many of our lives! So here is the secret: God loves us in a way nobody else ever does, loves us in a way that nobody else can ever measure up to, loves us enough to satisfy the deep craving of our hearts. God thinks we are special, God never ignores or deserts us, God knows our need for affirmation and unconditional love. And in Jesus he sent unconditional love into the world in a new way.

"Love came down at Christmas." That's more than a sentimental children's song - that's deep theology. God is love, and he sent his Son to show us that love.

2) Love And Sacrifice

So let's ask again, how does God love us? *"God showed his love by sending his Son so that we might live through him."* The Father sent his Son so that we could truly live!

But that means more than a warm feeling of affirmation inside us. It means sacrifice on God's part for our welfare. We did not realize how much of our sense of not being loved was attributable to that ancient curse called sin. It's because we are all fallen sinners that we do not love as we should, that our cultures teach distorted views of "love" as sexual exploitation or macho domination or heaping up material comforts or slavery. Love cannot flourish while those things dominate.

So *"God showed his love by sending his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* Not the way we would have dealt with the problem, of

course: if we were God, we would have come down and banged a few heads together, and said "shape up" - which quite a few people expected him to do! But his aim from the beginning had been to absorb the evil into himself, to defeat sin by love and sacrifice, to "overcome evil with good."

So Jesus came as a helpless infant, dependent on the love of a young rural couple to raise him, to protect him from the murderers of his day, and to teach him God's words and God's ways. And when he became a man, he said he was the longed for "good shepherd" of Israel, whose calling was to *"lay down his life for his sheep."* *"Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."* We still, thank God, have not completely lost the meaning of such words - we know that young Marines in Afghanistan throw themselves on explosives to save their buddies. We still "get" self-sacrifice.

God gets it too. Jesus said he would *"give his life a ransom for many."* For the sake of an unloving world that largely rejects him, the Son of God would die. And in doing that, he would mysteriously take away the power of sin and death to dominate our lives, our cultures, our world. Oh, not everyone would get the point or embrace the sacrifice - *"he came to his own and his own rejected him... But to those who received him and believed in him, he gave the right to become children of God."*

People who - in Old Testament language - "placed their hands on the sacrificial lamb" and identified with Jesus in his death for them; people who said "yes, I need atoning for; yes, I need forgiving; yes, I need remaking and re-loving and re-energizing... thank you, Lord Jesus Christ for making these things possible: come into my life, and make me what you designed me to be, and teach me what real love is like." People who do that, who "believe and receive," become (in John's words) *"children of God."*

3) Children of God

How amazing is that idea! *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God... and that is what we are!"* If we are now living "in Christ" and he is living "in us;" if we are "joined to Jesus by faith," we are now his brothers and sisters, and members of his family.

And in case that should seem too abstract, he actually gives us "brothers and sisters in Christ." He places us in communities of faith - churches - where we learn what it is to be loved by people who know God's love. Because they are having that great hole in their lives filled by the love of God, because they have discovered that Jesus' death for them is the greatest love - "that a man lays down his life for his friends" - they are discovering that *"God's love is poured out into their hearts by the Holy Spirit."*

In a "spiritual community," you discover - in other people and yourself - that once you have experienced it, once you have "tasted" it, God's love makes a difference. And when it begins to "pour into your heart" you discover that it can *overflow* into love for other people. That is not only what the Father commands his children - that they should love one another as he has loved them; but he also gives them the power to love, using *his love*.

So in the community of faith, we begin at last to experience what it means to be loved unconditionally, persistently, when we are in need and when we are rejoicing; to live among people who care for our welfare and our flourishing, people who know at a deep level - as we do ourselves - that it is only the grace of God our Father; the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus; the Holy Spirit at work within and among believers, that makes self-giving love a possibility.

This is where we experience, and learn, what it means to "lay down our lives" for other people - which is not being doormats who allow children or spouses or bosses or colleagues to walk all over us - but becoming people who can "turn the other cheek, go the second mile;" people concerned for the welfare of the people God has put into our lives.

God gives us the gift of his love this Christmas, so that we can give it to other people.

Let us pray...