

# Advent 2017 – Fourth Sunday - Love

12/24/17

1 Corinthians 13:1

*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.*

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, on which we consider the aspect of love. We have looked at Hope, the expectancy of the rebirthing of the Christ Spirit within us. We have talked about the Peace that we receive as we release our concerns and simply know with certainty that the Christ is within us. We have considered the Joy of the season of Advent, as we become aware of the connection with other souls and with Spirit, and let that energy of Joy flow through us.

Today, we do the same with Love. We look at opening our hearts, minds, lives, and souls to the flow of Love that the spirit of the Christ Jesus so exemplified.

In Luke 10:25-28 we read this: <sup>25</sup>*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* <sup>26</sup>*"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"* <sup>27</sup>*He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* <sup>28</sup>*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

Do this and you will live – love, and you will live. Love God and your neighbor – as yourself; love God, people, and yourself...and you will have eternal life.

For me that is the single most important message that Jesus was born to give: Love God, love your fellow man, love yourself. A simple message: easy to understand, not a lot of interpreting necessary, and yet so difficult to implement.

Sometimes our difficulty lies in loving ourselves. Sometimes we don't even like ourselves, let alone love ourselves. The challenge begins when we compare ourselves with others. We know ourselves, our weaknesses, our foibles, our past actions, our thoughts. Sometimes those haven't lived up to the standards that we have set for ourselves. Our egos dictate certain standards, particular behaviors, and when they are not met we judge ourselves; and based upon those standards and behaviors we see ourselves as unfit. With this focus, our self-perception is inferior to how we perceive someone else.

The mistake in that line of thinking is that we cannot see the person to whom we compare ourselves the same way we see ourselves. If we could, we would see that they are equally flawed, filled with human weaknesses, just as we are.

Of course, the exact opposite can happen; we can judge others as inferior based upon our perception of them. We can't see their heart, their moral and ethical code, their relationship with God or how they love others. We judge them based upon religion, ethnicity, life situation, or just one particular moment when they are less than stellar. They may be a saint, but when we see them

they have low blood sugar and are crabby. We think, “Some saint he is! He treats everyone terribly. I may not be a saint, but at least I am considerate of others.”

When we stop the comparisons we can then love ourselves in a healthy manner, neither condemning nor exalting ourselves.

I heard a story about a family who were financially challenged. The dad was out of work, and had been for many months. He was depressed because he felt like a failure to his wife and eleven-year-old son. His ego was setting standards that he had not met, so he was beating himself up. I know that feeling, because I’ve been there. I’ve experienced that mental battle, and it is not enjoyable – to wallow in guilt, and self-deprecating thoughts.

It was Christmas time for this family, and they had no tree, no gifts, no food, and of course no hope, peace, joy, and no love.

Their church heard of their struggle and got together and brought them a tree, some groceries, and some presents for each of them. The father could not psychologically deal with this. He saw it as further proof that he was unable to provide for his family. What he drew from this experience was that he was worthless. In fact, he was so distraught that he left and never returned to his family. He had allowed the unrealistic standards of his ego to totally destroy his sense of self-worth.

The eleven-year-old had an entirely different reaction to the situation. What he saw was that they could now eat! They had gifts to open, they had a tree to enjoy. His spirits were lifted. He accepted and appreciated the love, care, and generosity of these

people. What this boy learned was that people can be trusted, people were giving, loving, and could care for each other.

When this boy was 17, he was working and had put a savings aside. At Christmas time he singled out one family and did for them what had been done for him. He purchased a tree, food, and gifts, and gave them to a family. That was all he could afford. But the next year he bestowed this gift upon two families, the following year four families, then eight families. As the years went by, his desire to share with others demanded he get help in this project.

Last year, this multi-billionaire fed and provided gifts to over two million people. Today, Anthony Robins, the self-help teacher, has goals of feeding millions more people.

The first step is to love ourselves, which paves the way to loving others and to loving God. For me, it is difficult to love God when I have feelings of hostility towards others. It's easy for me to say, "I love God", but it is difficult to generate feelings of love for God when I am unsettled spiritually.

I can even go through the motions that would indicate I love God. People could look at me and say, "There goes a lover of God." I can put up a good front and fool others. But I can't fool myself, and I can't fool God. I can only feel close to God when I am right with my fellow man. So, I spend time on forgiveness during my prayer time, and concentrate on accepting others. I believe this is a common situation for humans, which is why Jesus taught us to say, "...and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

If we want to love Christ, and demonstrate our love for Christ, then doesn't it make sense to live the life of the Christ. That life is forgiveness, acceptance, appreciation, and love.

It is difficult for me to hear people say that they love God and then treat other people with disdain and disrespect. I know a young woman who recently went to work and was speaking with her Manager, who was a Christian woman, about religion. The next day the young woman went to work and the boss began to berate the younger woman for her beliefs. Apparently, the Manager went to the internet and did some "research" on this religion. The supervisor was antagonistic, challenging, and disrespectful in front of co-workers, asking things like, "How can you believe that? Why do you believe this?"

The young employee refused to engage the argument and told her boss that she was not going to discuss her views, that she felt offended by the manager's remarks, and that she was being rude and intolerant. This is what teachers mean when they say to children, "Use your words," rather than their fists.

As Christians, how can we claim to love God when we choose not to live the life that Christ modeled for us? Christ would not berate someone for what they believed. He was not mean-spirited or a religious predator. The Christ within directs us to appreciate others for who they are, where they are. They may be different from us in numerous ways, but we are led to love them.

Gradually, we must learn to love the diversity of this creation and not seek uniformity in all things. Christ guides us towards love,

inclusiveness, and acceptance, not towards exclusivity. Christ wanted to build his church, not a small band of believers, desperate for survival in an arena of enemies: quick to attack foes who think differently than themselves, or who look different, or sound different; quick to defend their position in outspoken tirades of “I’m right and you are wrong”, one-sided arguments of accusation and belittlement. That is the religion of fear and ignorance, not of Christ. Christ’s church is made of love.

Love your neighbor - is what the commandment instructs. It doesn’t say love your neighbor only if they like you, only if they act like you, only if they agree with you. Those are the easy ones to love – they are like family. It’s easy to love family.

But we are instructed to love our neighbor – someone “outside the family”. Those are the hard ones to love - those neighbors. Many of them are weird; they’re different...and we are commanded to love them anyway.

When we can look at a middle eastern Muslim terrorist and see them for who they truly are – a child of God in need of correction because their behavior is destructive – but we don’t hate them or wish them ill, then we are seeing them with love. When we can send them the light and love of God in our prayers, asking that God fill their hearts, then we love our neighbor. We are not asked to agree with our neighbors, only to love them – to see them for who they really are – naughty or nice, a child of God.

When we can look without judgment upon ourselves, and acknowledge that our past thoughts, words, and deeds perhaps have not met our standards, and still hold ourselves in esteem

because of who we are – a Child of God – and not berate ourselves, but encourage ourselves on the next attempt, and speak positively about ourselves to others and in our own minds, and treat our bodies with respect, then we love ourselves.

When we can love our neighbor as ourselves, then it becomes easier to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind.

When we can love God, ourselves, and each other, we change; we no longer live in fear. We see situations without judgement because we are not judging the people who are causing the situation. We see that they are behaving based upon their spiritual awareness. We have our awareness and are doing the best we can with what we have, and know, and who we are. So is everyone else. Love allows us to look past behaviors, attitudes, and fears and see into their hearts.

A mouse is just a mouse; it is a creature of God. We don't have to fear it; we only need to know how to treat it and avoid it. We can still love it and allow it to be. We can remove it with a live trap and take it to a field. Despite the infinite variety of creatures that live on earth, we can learn to get along. Love asks that of us.

I pray that Christ be born within our hearts this season, bringing a newer and deeper awareness of the Love that God shares with us and through us for ourselves and all others. May that Love flow back to its Source, and may this circle of Love forever surround us.

Let us pray....