

ADVENT IV: THE BIRTH OF LOVE

(12/27/09)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13
1 John 4:7- 12, 16-21
John 3:16-17

As you know, we had to cancel church last Sunday because of the snow. There really wasn't much debate about it when Lou, Dianne, Sandy and I conferenced at 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning.

In the midst of a world where every social issue seems complex, e.g., whether we should establish a system of socialized health care; whether funding for abortion should be provided by taxpayers who do not believe in abortion; whether we should increase our military presence in Afghanistan; and whether the federal government should be involved in regulating business; it was refreshing to be able to make a decision that everyone agreed was a "no-brainer." Of course we could add to this no-brainer list the matter of whether the Red Sox should consider trading Jacoby Ellsbury.

Last Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, was technically Christmas Sunday. I say "technically" because Christmas Sunday is traditionally the last Sunday before Christmas. However, if you think about it, today is closer to Christmas than last Sunday. As a non-denominational church we could claim the freedom to declare that today is Christmas Sunday, just for our church. So this is what we are doing.

An additional benefit of claiming this liturgical license is that we can use the Advent bulletin cover that we ordered for last Sunday. I hate to waste bulletin covers. So the theme of our worship today will be the fourth gift of Christmas, the gift of love. Since Chris, Nancy, Patrick and Jonathan Mantos, who were scheduled to light the Advent candle last Sunday, are unable to be with us because they are celebrating Christmas with Nancy's mother in New Hampshire, we took the liberty of lighting the fourth Advent candle, the candle of love, just before our service began this morning.

The Advent bulletins, which Bob L'Heureux orders every year, usually focus on the four gifts of Christmas. The problem is that the people who design these bulletins, in their attempt to be creative, exhibit a more than marginal propensity for placing these gifts in a different order every year. The most common order is hope, peace, joy, and then love.

With regard to the progression of the themes, the bulletin designers probably want them to lead up to the greatest gift of all. However, they seem unable to decide which gift is the greatest. One year they select joy as the fourth candle and another year love. Not content to simply juggle the order of joy and love, they occasionally alternate hope and peace. A few years ago they replaced “hope” with “longing.” I actually liked that. On another occasion the substitution of “preparing” for “waiting” gave me an opportunity to preach on John the Baptist. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. It just means that I have to rewrite the readings for the lighting of the Advent candles every stinking year.

This year the bulletin creators have taken an entirely different twist: they have substituted verbs for nouns. The four themes of Advent this year have been waiting, preparing, rejoicing, and loving.

I think I understand the reasoning behind this switch. A verb is more active than a noun. A noun is a person, place or thing. A verb is something you are or something you do. For example, I find it more meaningful to think of believing than having a belief. A belief is something you have or don’t have; believing is something you do. I feel the same way about faith. The way some people use the term you would think that faith is something that people either “have” or “don’t have,” as in “Do you have faith?” I don’t know exactly how to make faith into a verb, but I do believe we should think of faith as a way of relating to God rather than as something we possess or don’t possess.

This past month as I reflected on the verbs of Advent that are articulated in the Advent bulletins, I had the feeling that I have heard something like this before. I knew I had heard a poem about the verbs of Christmas many years ago, but I couldn’t quite remember where or when. When you get to be my age you will understand. It’s all in there somewhere; it’s just the retrieval system that is not as fast or efficient as it used to be. And I’m only a third of the way through life!

Finally it came to me. One of my favorite poets, Rod McKuen, wrote several Christmas poems (he called them psalms) that appeared in *Woman’s Day* in December, 1969. (Please don’t ask me why I was reading *Women’s Day*.) I dug into my files and found what I was looking for in the manila folder marked “Christmas poems.” Go figure.

Listen to what Rod McKuen has to say in “psalm number three / improving language” about the verbs of Christmas and the theme of this morning’s reflection.

Christmas shouldn’t be another doorway
that widens out our heart’s horizons,
it should be the only window
in the house we call ourselves.
For Christmas is but one more word for love.

Make *christmas* to me.
I *christmas* you more than I
have *christmassed* anyone before.
When my hair has turned to silver
Will you still *christmas* me
as much or more than you do now?

You see it wouldn’t be so hard
to Christmas one another every day.
First the capital C must go,
now try it sans italics.

The last verses make more sense if you could see that the word Christmas is not capitalized, is set in italics, and if you knew that “sans” is the French word for “without.”

In this poem McKuen turns a noun into a verb. Instead of thinking of Christmas as a day, he invites us to think of it as a way of relating to the world. He tells us that it shouldn’t be just one more doorway that widens out the horizons of our heart (which certainly wouldn’t be bad), but “it should be the only window in the house we call ourselves.” This is because, as he puts it, “Christmas is but one more word for love.”

Christmas is but one more word for love. Rod McKuen’s attempt to improve the language of Christmas encourages us to explore the relationship of Christmas not only to love but to loving. He challenges us to think of love not as a noun, something we either have or don’t have, but as a verb, something we do or don’t do. He encourages us to think of both Christmas and love as the quality of our relationship with other people and (hopefully) the quality of our relationship with God.

When we think of Christmas and love as verbs, we can see their connection to the theme of birth and the quote from the 12th century German mystic Angelus Silesius that we have been using as the focus of our reflections during Advent. Angelus Silesius tells us that the secret of the incarnation lies within our heart when he says,

If you hope to give birth to God on earth, remember: conception takes place in the heart, the womb of the Eternal.

It is in our heart, where love is conceived and then born, that the Christ child enters into us, is born or incarnated within us. As we become more loving through the power of his presence, we will then give birth to or incarnate God on earth.

This morning we will think about the fourth gift of Christmas: the gift of love, how we can become more loving, and how we, like Mary, can give birth to this gift in our lives. This is the last and most important step in preparing for the coming of the Lord into our lives. The other candles, the other gifts, mean little unless we experience and express that most wondrous gift of all, the gift of love.

The First Letter of John tells us “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” The Bible tells us we are made in God’s image. If God is love, then the core of our being has to be love. Contrary to the materialistic metaphysic that dominates our contemporary culture, we are not primarily material beings; we are spiritual beings. We are incarnations of God’s creative love. This is beautifully expressed in a bumper sticker that I saw recently: “We are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings seeking a human experience.”

God’s love is central to creation. It is central to all life. It is central to human life. God’s great love connects heaven and earth, spirit and matter, the temporal and the eternal, this world and the next. It is the most important part of God’s relationship with us, and it is (hopefully) the most important part of our relationship with God. This is why Jesus told us that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.

The apostle Paul tells us that love begins with acceptance. This is true of our relationships with each other. It is also true of our relationship with God. Jesus tells us that God accepts us as we are, even though we are sinners, even though we are broken. We don’t have to become perfect to be acceptable to God. We are accepted and loved already, as we are. Once we realize this, once we *fully* realize this, our lives will be transformed and a more Christian, a more loving life will shine forth.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells us that God is like a good and loving parent. If God is like a parent that has given birth to creation, then all creation is

a manifestation, an expression, an incarnation of God's love. If God is like a loving parent that has given birth to human life, then we are all God's children. Whether we are Christian or Muslim, believer or atheist, criminal or law-abiding citizen, we are *all* God's children. God loves each and every one of us.

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love each other. If we are all God's children, then we are *all* brothers and sisters: red and yellow, black and white heterosexual and homosexual. Even Muslim terrorists are our brothers and sisters. We may have to defend ourselves against those who hate us and would attack us, but this does not mean that we cannot feel sorry for them, have compassion for them, and perhaps even love them.

Love is one of the marks of the Christian life. It is a gift of faith, a fruit of the Spirit. In his letter to the early church, John tells us that the love of God and the love we feel toward our brothers and sisters are inextricably intertwined. He says,

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.

Jesus tells us that the second commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Finally, if God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love ourselves. A healthy self-acceptance, a healthy self-love must be built around an honest appraisal of both our strengths and our weaknesses. This was the message of John the Baptist. There are times when we relate to others out of love and compassion, and there are times when need to admit that we have reacted out of our brokenness.

The experience of being accepted and loved by God as *we are* is tempered by the humbling realization of how often we live lives that are less than we can be, that are less than God wants us to be. In this regard I find it helpful to remember the words of the Zen master who told his student, "You are perfect just the way you are . . . but there's always room for improvement."

Because I believe that this gift of love is the greatest of all God's gifts, I like the choice of the candle of love as the candle for Christmas Sunday. Love is a great

connecting energy. When we are in God, in the kingdom of God, we are in a great field of spiritual energy, the healing energy of love. This energy has the power to transform us, to transform our relationships, and to transform the world. It also has the power to heal us both psychologically and physically.

The message of Christmas is that God so loved the world that not only entered into the world in Jesus, he enters into the world today. Whenever we open ourselves to love, we open ourselves to the birth of Christ. As the first letter of John tells us, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Rod McKuen echoes this teaching in his plea that we not limit our celebration of the birth of Christ to a single day of the year, but that we take the heart of Christmas, the gift of love, and bring it into our everyday life as we "christmas one another" throughout the year.

Throughout this Advent season, we have tried to think about what it would mean to become more hopeful, more peaceful, more joyous, and more loving. When we, like Mary, give birth to these gifts in our lives, we experience the birth of Christ within us.

Let us, like Mary, open our hearts to God in this Christmas season. Let us become, as Mary was, the "womb of the eternal" that the spirit of our Lord might be born once again within us and then, through us, might bring its healing presence and power to the world. When we do this, we will discover that we are not only celebrating, we are experiencing and incarnating the true meaning of Christmas.

So hope, peace, joy and love abide, these four. But the greatest of these is love.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
December 27, 2009*