

Providence Presbyterian Church
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December 18, 2022
Luke 1: 26-38; Advent theme of love

Abby is learning to drive, and making good progress compared to the day she drove around the block, pulled into the driveway, and stamped into the house yelling, "I'm done!" She has many more hours to get comfortable in the various driving situations one finds oneself in, but we are hopeful that she will get there. Our giant puppy, Fischer, often goes to the bathroom outside, giving hope that someday he will go outside every time. During the holidays, we like to hear and highlight positive stories of kindness, giving the hope that the good can displace the bad that often receives the focus.

We have been in the season of Advent, a season of anticipating and waiting for God's kingdom to come to fruition, for God's ways to overwhelm the world and bring a new day. It is here in that Christ came two thousand years ago and is at work in us and in the world. But God's redemptive purposes have not come to fullness yet. It is what theologians call the "already" and the "not-yet;" these dual aspects of the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is here already, and yet, at the same time, the fullness of the kingdom is not-yet; it is still to come.

In Advent, we remember that Christ has come into the world, the already, and we await Christ's return when he brings God's kingdom to fullness and fruition, the not-yet. But even while we wait and long, we see and partake in a foretaste of God's kingdom already, imagining what it might look and feel like when God brings it in fullness, the not-yet.

Our advent theme this morning is love, so I am thinking about the already and not yet aspects of love. We each have experienced love; we have had moments expressing God's love. We try to live out those great commandments of loving the Lord with all our being and loving our neighbors as ourselves. But how do you love the Lord with all your being? I suspect your notions of what this means has come from watching others. And loving your neighbor as yourself, who have you learned that from?

I think of how my wife takes on the worries and struggles of our kids, bearing their weight. I think of my old YL leader friend, Larry, and how he spent time in his bible every day and how he spent his free time reaching out to rural adolescents prone to trouble, trying to guide them and to let them know how much they are loved. I think of my college professor's heart, sense of calm and clarity and how he

led him to positions and perspectives that went counter to the institution he worked for. There were the Pridmores who spent their family Thanksgiving serving dinner to the homeless. Or my friend Dale Scott here in Denver who worked for several years with Crosspurpose, and would open his home to folks struggling to turn their lives around and rebuild a sense of self and vocation. I think of Tom Roth in his study every morning at five am, spending time with the Lord. Who are your models? What are the little snapshots of loving the Lord, or loving neighbor that taught you what it might mean?

We have examples to start with. Christ has come into the world, has embodied love, and has become a loving sacrifice for us. There is love in the world, and there are faithful followers of the Lord that we can take the example of. There are people doing good to others, people we can count on and call on. God's love is here in the world and in this community. It is there for us to receive, accept, and choose to express. But the not-yet aspect of the kingdom might invite us to ask, what have I yet to learn? What have I to learn both in loving the Lord and loving my neighbor as myself, and even loving myself so that I might know how to love my neighbor?

The love we have known and expressed is a foretaste. The love of the kingdom we desire is not yet, we are still growing into it, and God has yet to bring it all to fulfillment. Love in this world is always mixed, tainted, and muddled with our human needs to be loved and affirmed. The impulse to love gets mixed with various insecurities and impulses, such as a desire to fix things for others, and to be important and recognized for our deeds and sacrifices. Love is a mixed bag, our personal needs and motivations blending into the mix. We may try to love and come away feeling guilty. We try to love but dysfunctional relationships and broken systems persist despite our best efforts.

Have you ever tried to love a child or a friend or a parent and felt your attempts resented? Did they push back or pull away? Our attempts at love often go sideways. We try to love, and sometimes it creates codependent relationships; sometimes it seems to make bigger messes, and we feel all the worse. In our attempts to love others, we are lured into simplistic answers for complex problems. Sometimes we are taken advantage of. And even when we find ways to love people in need, and each act is significant, these efforts often seem so small compared to the overwhelming needs. It makes me long for the day when we will know God's love in its purity and perfection, not muddled with the complexities of human sinfulness.

In our Psalm reading, we hear about the steadfast love of the Lord. But there is a cultural aspect intertwined here also. Part of how Israel experienced God's

steadfast love and faithfulness is by beating up their enemies, God siding with Israel's armies, giving Israel victory, and stilling the forces of chaos that threaten. Part of how Israel experienced God's love was having their own king on the throne fit with power and control. These are contextualized and culturized views of God's love. Love mixed with power and force.

This highlights the "not yet." That while we know something of God's love and redemptive potential, it gets mingled and complicated with our personal stories, with our family histories, national histories, with our cultural baggage, and so on. We play out our humanity even as we seek to express the transcendent quality of God's love. As my mentor Thom used to say regularly, "it's a muddle."

In Advent, we hold the already together with the not yet, recognizing these are connected though not the same. We hold these together, embracing the expressions of love that connect us with God's love and which make our lives richer. Which give us examples to follow, all while longing and yearning for that fuller love that will indeed restore us, make us whole, and bring us together in unity.

The Christmas story carries old expectations of God intervening in the world, of restoring David's throne, or showing loving kindness to God's people in ways Psalm 89 expresses. Even so, the beauty of the Christmas story is its strangeness. God's greatest expression of love does not conform to those expectations of thrones and royalty and might and power. As Mary's song expresses, God chooses the lowly things of the world to shame the proud. God chooses the young Mary to be the mother and bearer of this child, and this child is born on a dirt floor house in the hills of Judah. While God's people waited for a messiah, someone to right the political orders, God himself came low, came near. For God so loved the world that he gave his son.

Jesus' life and ministry would continue to play out a bold vision for God's love and visitation, but always diverging from expectations. Always calling his listeners to expand their conceptions of God's plans and love. Jesus always confronted those who thought they understood God's love and plans. And he lifts up those open to his ministry and leading, lifts up those that were open to knowing God's love more fully.

This week, as we approach our Christmas celebration, we celebrate and give thanks for God's love that has come into the world and into our lives. But may we also contemplate how we might continue to learn of God's love, to press into the not-yet. Please don't be offended, but what I am suggesting is that despite all the love and care and kindness present in this room, it is still muddled with our human

needs and brokenness, and we still have much to learn, have ways to grow, aspects of God's love and loving others that have yet to learn.

Our poem this morning reads like a meditation activity, a tutorial on how to slow down and to learn to let God love us. "Let your God love you," is her title. And you may say, I know God's love, I don't need that nonsense. Maybe. But aren't we all still learning such things? And what are the practices that get you in touch with that love, a love that might slow our reactivity or check our self-isolation?

Be silent.
Be still.
Alone.
Empty
Before your God.
Say nothing.
Ask nothing.
Be silent.
Be still.
Let your God look upon you.
That is all.
God knows.
God understands.
God loves you
With an enormous love,
And only wants
To look upon you
With that love.
Quiet.
Still.
Be.
Let your God—
Love you.

What does it mean for God to love the world so much that he would come low and quiet to an animal stall in the hills of Judah? What does it mean to be loved with an everlasting and unconditional love? What does it mean to love one's neighbor as oneself, and how do we need to grow in our love of self, so that we might know how to love one's neighbor?

Love is present in the world. But our best attempts at love struggle against the ingrained forces of sin and brokenness. So let us not be content in our self-

understanding, let us not be content in our habitual patterns. But let us yearn and seek the day when the love we have experienced will be known in its fullness, no longer muddled with and muddied by our human brokenness and sinfulness. Let us yearn for it, and let us seek it. And may the presence of God's love in the world already renew the hope that it will someday overwhelm the world, and be known in its fullness.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

And all God's people said...