

Love Came Down At Christmas

I John 4: 7 - 21

Psychologists, theologians, and poets tell us that our greatest need as human beings is to love and to be loved.

I would certainly not argue with that, but I would go one step further -- and say that not only do we have a need to love and be loved, we need to receive *evidence* that we are loved, and we need to *give evidence* that we love as well. I choose the word 'need' on purpose. We *need* this to be healthy.

In other words, it is not enough for us, psychologically, or emotionally, or spiritually, to simply 'be loved'; it is not enough to simply say we "love" -- these are meaningless statements unless two things are happening:

1. We hear love stated . . . put into words. Spoken. Written.
2. We see some 'evidence' of that spoken love. In deeds. Actions.

This might seem obvious to many of you here today. It might seem like common sense. But I've been around long enough to know that 'common' sense is usually anything but common! It's rather rare! So I say to you, unless *both* of these are happening, unless we are expressing love through words and actions and receiving expressions of love, also through words and actions, we are not going to be secure in our inner selves, in our relationships -- whether we're talking about a relationship with a parent, or a spouse, or a friend. Words and action are both important, aren't they?

Did you ever notice that when you are buying a special greeting card for your wife/ husband, you know, for Valentine's Day, Birthday . . . that so many of the cards begin like this: "*I know I don't often say it...* I guess its easy to forget sometimes some very basic things. How hard is it to say, "*I love you?*" Maybe your mom or dad never said it to you, but it's not that hard. Start a new tradition. Find someone today and try it - it's just three words!

Robert Ripley, of "Believe it or Not" fame, wrote about the world's longest love letter. He said that the longest, as well as simplest, love letter ever written was the work of a romantic Frenchman in 1875. His message contained the phrase "Jevous Aime" or "I love you" 1,875,000 times. This was a thousand times the calendar year to date.

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Now, as a matter of fact, this star struck lover did not pen the letter with his own hand. No. He hired a scribe. A lazy type would have simply instructed the secretary to write '*Jevous Aime*' 1,875,000 times, right? Who would have counted? But this fellow was too entranced with the sound of the words.

Therefore, he dictated the letter to the scribe WORD FOR WORD! Then he had the hired hand repeat the letter back WORD FOR WORD! All in all, the phrase was uttered orally and in writing 5,625,000 times before it reached its destination. Think about it! I mean the guy was a nut, but *wow!*

Mr. Ripley then goes on to say, "*Never was love made manifest by as great an expenditure of time and effort.*" Now, don't get me wrong, I appreciate this Frenchman's effort, and I certainly hope his girlfriend did as well. But I do believe that Mr. Ripley very wrong!

There was, in fact, a much greater expenditure of time and effort to make love known. And that's what we're celebrating here this week. I John 4: 9 -10 says this: *God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

What we need in our *human* relationships we need just as much on a *spiritual* level: we need to be loved by our Creator; and we need to hear that love expressed, and to see evidence of that love. God knows that we have this need. After all, we've been created in God's own image. And knowing what we needed, God has done both.

In the person of Jesus Christ, God became knowable to us mere humans, who had no way to comprehend his glory. Through the mouth of Jesus, God spoke words of love to every person. Those words have been recorded in the Scripture for all people to read, and hear. And also, through his acts of love and healing, and mercy, and ultimately through his sacrificial death, Jesus *showed* us the extent of God's love.

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There was an Hasidic rabbi, renowned for his piety who was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted young disciples. In a burst of emotion, the young man exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The old teacher looked up from his books and asked him, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

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The young man was puzzled. Trying to compose himself, he said, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions." The Rabbi responded, "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant, for if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"¹

God knew where *we* hurt the most. He knew our greatest need, that is why John wrote: *This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

The ultimate expression of love is when the Source of Love put aside his glory, and power; and in humility took the form of a man to speak words of love to people who did not deserve it, and to show the greatest expression of love in all Creation... love shown in Words and Action . . .

How important they are to us.

There was a country church in a small village in Croatia. One day near the beginning of the twentieth century an altar boy named Josip Broz served the priest at Sunday Mass. During the Mass the boy accidentally dropped the glass cruet of wine. It smashed to pieces. The village priest struck the altar boy sharply on the cheek and in a gruff voice shouted: "*Leave the altar and don't come back.*" He never came back to church at all. That boy became Tito, the Communist leader of Yugoslavia after World War II.

About the same time another altar boy named Peter John served at Mass in St. Mary's Cathedral, Peoria, Illinois. This altar boy, too, dropped the wine cruet. In later life, that boy wrote: "There is no atomic explosion that can equal in intensity of decibels the noise and explosive force of a wine cruet falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death". (Treasure In Clay, pp. 10-12) The celebrant at Mass that morning was Bishop John Spalding. With a warm twinkle in his eye, the bishop gently whispered: "Someday you will be just what I am."

That boy grew up to become Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, one of the Church's most eloquent

¹ [Madeleine L'Engle in "Walking on Water". Christianity Today-Vol. 30, #14]

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spokesmen for Christ. He wrote more than fifty books. During the 1950's he became widely known as a television personality. He spoke on Tuesday evenings in a series of programs called "*Life Is Worth Living.*" As a boy, he dropped his first name "Peter" and used, instead, his mother's maiden name, 'Fulton.'

What a difference the **words** of those two celebrants of the Mass made in the lives of those boys!

Sigmund Freud said: "Words call forth emotions and are universally the means by which we influence our fellow creatures. By words one of us can give another the greatest happiness or bring about utter despair."

Nearly three thousand years before Freud, the book of Proverbs in the Bible stated: "*Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal.*" (Proverbs 12:18)

What an amazing thought to realize that the Creator of all things has said to us: ". . . *I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself.*" (Jer. 31:3) Jesus, the presence of God on earth, saying to his friends on the night before he was to willingly give his life for them (and all people): "*As the Father has loved me, so I loved you.*" (John 15:9) Words of healing. God knows what we need.

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While serving in Vietnam in 1969, a fellow by the name of Dave Roever nearly died when a phosphorus grenade exploded six inches from his right ear. He survived, but was badly disfigured. He describes his reunion with his young wife, Brenda, after returning to the United States:

"Brenda walked straight up to my bed, paused at the chart, read the tag on my arm and, showing not the slightest tremor of horror or shock, bent over and kissed me on what was left of my face. Then she looked me in my good eye, smiled and said: "Welcome home, Davey. I love you!""

All I could say was, "I want you to know I'm real sorry." She asked: "Why are you sorry?" "Because I can never look good for you again." She grinned and said, "Oh, Davey, you never were good-looking anyway." And that was the beginning of the deep psychological and spiritual healing which eventually quenched the fire of my ordeal so I could face the world again."

Words of love, and expressions of love. It's what we need. God knows what we need, and God has provided exactly that. In the coming of Jesus Christ, which we celebrate in this Christmas season, we

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hear, and see expressions of the greatest love ever known.

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On Monday, August 9, 1993, a 31-year-old woman, Sopehia Mardress White, burst into the hospital nursery at USC Medical Center in Los Angeles, wielding a .38 caliber handgun. She had come gunning for Elizabeth Staten, a nurse whom she accused of stealing her husband.

White fired six shots, hitting Staten in the wrist and stomach. Staten fled, and White chased her into the emergency room, firing once more. There, with blood on her clothes and a hot pistol in her hand, the attacker was met by another nurse, Joan Black, who did the unthinkable. Black walked calmly to the gun-toting woman--and hugged her. Black spoke comforting words. The assailant said she didn't have anything to live for, that Staten had stolen her family.

"You're in pain," Black said. "I'm sorry, but everybody has pain in their life... I understand, and we can work it out." As they talked, the invader kept her finger on the trigger. Once she began to lift the gun as though she would shoot herself. Nurse Black just pushed her arm down and continued to hold her. At last Sopehia White gave the gun to the nurse. Disarmed by a hug, by understanding, by compassion. Black later told an AP reporter, "I saw a sick person and had to take care of her."

Jesus Christ looks upon us in a similar fashion, as persons sick and broken inside, in need of his care. And it is his embrace that disarms us. [Leadership-Vol. 15 #1.]

Words of love and actions that back it up. That's what God is offering each of us this Christmas. This is the last Sunday in Advent. We now have four candles blazing, and the light is much brighter than when we began this journey four weeks ago. One thing is very different about this morning's candle.

The first three candles represented hope, peace, and joy -- and as we looked at them we saw, that while we can in some sense experience all of those things now, the reality is that whatever hope, or peace, or joy that we do experience now is a "deposit taken from a future account that God is holding for us."

Hope is something that looks ahead... we can know that we have good reason to hope, (and we do!) but we'll not find our hope fulfilled until sometime in the future.

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We can have an experience of peace now, but it is the kind of peace that exists within the storm -- the storm is still raging. We can experience joy, but it is joy tempered with the reality of this world where people suffer. But we have joy because we belong to the King, and we have faith that one day wrongs will be made right, and all hurt and pain will be healed, and God's reign will begin. We look ahead to that day.

But, really, the first three candles represent things that we've tasted, but haven't come in their fullness. We've had some *samples*, but the banquet has yet to begin!

But today is different. This candle represents love. And a wonderful thought occurred to me this week: "*this* one is as full as it will ever be." God will never love you or me any more (or any less) than he does right now. No matter how I look, no matter what choices I make -- right or wrong -- whether I'm steady or wobbly in my walk; God's love for me will be as constant, and steady, and mighty as it always had been. God will be willing to restore me, and you to wholeness. Always. To bring healing when we are broken . . . cleansing when we are dirty . . . help when we are helpless. . . direction when we lack our way. God will never love us more than he does right now.

How do I know that? I have the evidence: it's here -- words, and actions.

Love came down at Christmas. Don't walk away from this place this morning until you realize that the love that has come down is a personal love for *you*.