

**Christmas Love**  
**Second in a Series of four Sermons**  
**Advent Midweek Service**  
**December 7, 2022**

*I Corinthians 11: 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

Dear Christian Friends,

Our Midweek Advent Sermons are focused on the Four Candles of Advent and include references to the characters of the famous work of Charles Dickens, "The Christmas Carol. Next week, we will focus on Christmas Joy and on Christmas Eve - Christmas Peace. Last Wednesday, we explored the difference between "hope" based on human effort (as in hoping that the Vikings will win the Super Bowl this year) and hope based on divine effort (as in hoping for the resurrection of the bodies of loved ones we have laid into the ground.

Tonight's topic is Christmas Love. Christmas love begins with God so loving the world that He sent His only begotten Son to be our Savior. It goes full circle as we receive, revel in, enjoy, and share that gift of love in the real world. Tonight, we would invite you to reflect on the great love chapter of Scripture - I Corinthians 13.

This chapter has particular significance to Debi and me, ever since our wedding ceremony - Graebner Memorial Chapel, Concordia College, St. Paul, MN, May 25, 1974. This Scripture we planned to read at our ceremony and we did. But not before we had a little bit of a disagreement on whether we would read only verses 4-7 (which Debi wanted) or the entire chapter (which I wanted.) We "compromised" and did what I wanted! We read the entire chapter.

Three parts to our sermon tonight. 1) Verses 1-3 - The Necessity of Love, 2) verses 4-7 - The Character of Love, and 3) Verses 8-13 - The Permanence of Love

***The Absolute Necessity of Love***

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become a noisy brass or a clashing cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

My sister Gail and I both played in the brass section of our high school band. She was a far better trumpeter than I, but that's not the point of the story. What I remember well is that what we had in common is that as often as we practiced our trumpets at home, our farm dogs would howl. It seemed as though our dogs felt annoyed, not loved, when we played our brass instruments.

The Greek word for love in this chapter is Agape. In this context, Paul is teaching that if you are exercising your spiritual gifts without the proper motivation, you're wasting your time. It is absolutely necessary for the love of Christ to be permeating and driving our efforts to do good works in the sight of God. Even if you were to be speaking in tongues or prophesying the true Word of God, but were not doing so in response to God loving you first, you would be doing more harm than good. Even if you had the kind of faith to lead your congregation in building a magnificent multi-million dollar facility, but didn't have the eternal salvation of others in mind, you would be nothing in the sight of God. Even if you were to be the most generous giver in the church or were to be the most dedicated volunteer in Citrus County, but weren't doing it for the sake of Jesus Christ, you would be gaining nothing.

Distinctively Christian love is an intelligent kind of a love which has the big picture in mind. It has not only the present in mind, but the past and the future. Permit me to illustrate. Suppose you were to be convinced that the Salvation Army was a worthy cause, that they spent money well, and you chose to write out a check in their support. For that donation to be distinctively Christian in nature would mean that you were not only caring about the physical needs of the hungry and the homeless. You would be giving in response to the past actions of God in history - namely the life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. And you would have the future destiny of the needy in your heart - in other words, you would be praying that donations of food and clothing and medical care would be opening up doors for God's people to be sharing Christ in that context of human care.

Before, Ebenezer Scrooge had been visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, we find this conversation between him and a gentleman asking for donations towards a few local charities:

*Gentleman: A few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy the poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?*

*Scrooge: Nothing!*

*Gent: You wish to be anonymous?*

*Scrooge: I wish to be left alone. Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned. They cost enough, and those who are badly off must go there."*

Scrooge was obviously missing the point of Christmas. He understood neither the necessity of loving others in response to God loving us first, nor the character of that love.

### ***Love in Action: The Character of Love***

***4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.***

This wonderful paragraph uses no fewer than 15 verbs to describe the qualities, the nature, the character of Christian love. The first two verbs (longsuffering and kind) give a positive description of love's greatest qualities. Paul was deeply conscious of how much he owed to the perfect patience Christ Jesus had shown in His case. In this fast paced society of ours, we do well to remember that patience does not come naturally to us, but rather is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Patience is a virtue that is developed inside of us as we practice it over and over and over again.

They are followed by a series of 8 verbs which express what love is not (not jealous, does not brag, is not puffed up, does not behave improperly, is not self-seeking, is not provoked, does not keep a record of wrong, and does not rejoice in unrighteousness). This section reminds me of heaven, which is more often described in Scripture in terms of what is absent, than in terms of what is present.

The final four verbs are positive again, as in bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things. One man noted for his positive effect on the world around him was St. Nicholas, who lived for 73 years and is known to this day for his generosity to those in need, and especially for the way he loved and protected children. His wealthy parents raised him to be a devout Christian. They died in an epidemic when he was still young. In obedience to the words of Jesus to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. The date of his death, December 6th, is widely celebrated in Europe as the Feast Day of St. Nicholas. The stories of his goodness and generosity are legendary.

One story tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value—a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. This poor man's daughters, without dowries, were therefore destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home—providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas. Sometimes the story is told with gold balls instead of bags of gold. That is why three gold balls, sometimes represented as oranges, are one of the symbols for St. Nicholas. And so St. Nicholas is a gift-giver.

Getting Christmas right includes remembering the simple truth that actions of love speak so much more clearly and effectively than mere words. Being patient and kind with your neighbors is one thing, being patient and kind out of gratitude for your Savior's birth is distinctively Christmas love. Wishing someone a merry Christmas is a fine thing to wish for; helping them to pay down debt, in response to Christ paying your debt on the cross is distinctively Christian love. Telling someone that you'll pray for them is great; putting your hand on their shoulder and praying with them is another. Inviting family to your house for a well prepared meal is a terrific thing to do; inviting them to church and your Lord's Table is even better.

### ***The Permanence of Love***

***8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.***

***13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.***

There is love that is here today and gone tomorrow, and then there is the love of God which lasts forever. Just as surely as God's Word never falls to the ground ineffective, but always accomplishes its purposes....so Christian love will retain its honored place throughout time and eternity. Spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues or prophecy or a faith that can move mountains are so highly prized here and now

and rightfully so. But they are only of temporary value. Here on earth, we can only catch glimpses of what will be fully revealed in eternity, where we will live face to face with Christ.

Far more important than any spiritual gift or Christian knowledge here on God's green earth is the great triad of faith, hope, and love. Faith is the hand that receives God's gifts of peace and joy here and now, even when the storms of life are delivering the opposite. Our hope here and now is fixed on Christ and His promises, even when those promises seem far away and delayed. In heaven, we will no longer need faith, for we will be walking by sight. We won't need hope, for who hopes for what he already sees?

Love, on the other hand, is that virtue which endures throughout eternity. Agape love begins with God reconciling the world unto Himself in the Person and Ministry of Jesus Christ. It is, by definition, undeserved, sacrificial, beyond our comprehension, and contagious. The cycle of love is completed as we extend that undeserved and sacrificial kindness and patience towards others. With St. Nicholas in mind tonight, we would simply note that Christmas is an amazing opportunity to be intentional in terms of generosity not only to those who are near and dear to us, but to those whose days are full of trouble and trial.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks with something new and beautiful rising up in their hearts. Even as they confess their faults and flaws, they hear Jesus whispering in their ears - I came from heaven above to earth below so that your faults and flaws could be forgiven. As often as the love of Jesus Christ has a chance to rule inside of their hearts and minds, that often they find it possible to forgive folks who are neither apologizing nor changing their ways. That often, they find it possible to be kind and patient with folks who continue to disappoint them. That often, they find it possible to be generous even to those who are unappreciative.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.