

We just love love, right? Especially in this season.... I'm sure you can just picture it now – the Christmas Hallmark movie showing a couple holding hands ,probably on a walk through Central Park, snow falling lightly; not in a hurry, just enjoying time together. Or the shot of the camera panning out through a window where you see a family laughing together as they play a board game in front of the Christmas tree. Maybe your picture of love is a sweet grandmother opening her front door with delight and she's surprised by her grandkids dropping off freshly decorated cookies. That's what love looks like during the Christmas season, isn't it?

I can't possibly be the only one whose family games nights results in tears from the child who loses stomping off with a determination to 'never play this stupid game again'. I can't be the only one who's immediately regretted the ambitious project that yielded so much mess, so much cleaning and really mediocre results. And, even more than that I know for sure that I'm not the only one here who is wondering where exactly their love is this season. Where the idealistic pictures of families enjoying unhurried time together actually feels a lot more like hustling to keep up with unrealistic expectations imposed on us. Where time spent with loved ones is more like lonely days longing for what we don't have or maybe worse are being with loved ones, but feeling that loneliness and brokenness of fractured relationships in the midst of company. There are some here who face the realities that Christmas represents loss more than abundance because the people who we want to spend it with are not with us anymore.

So, if the hallmark version of Christmas love doesn't feel much like real life, does that mean that our lives are missing love? I don't think so.

I think what it means is that often what we're pulled to believing love is, is actually not the fullness of love, but light. I think we love light; that we love what is bright and calm and feels happy and feels safe. The reality is that our lives don't often look or feel very light. It might even be more accurate to say that our lives can look more dark than light, a lot of the time.

Love as a description often gets confused with lightness - but the reality is that love is a whole lot bigger, deeper, messier, heavier....and a whole lot more beautiful and transforming. So, on this Advent Sunday leaning into Love, it begs the question - where do we find full and real love in the context of the advent story.

As we look to Jesus, we see what love looks like.

In His very nature, God is love. In 1 John 4:7-8,

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and known God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love".

So, if God is, in very nature, love. We can know what love is by who Jesus is. Because he can't have done anything that was not in his nature. Jesus' life and ministry on Earth

become the most perfect example of love. Love being lived out in relationships. Love lived out in conflict. Love lived out in priorities. Love lived out as a purpose.

I'm sure that every one of us has experienced declarations, plans, or promises in the name of love....promises that weren't kept. It is one thing to declare love for someone; it is quite another to plan an act of love. Demonstrations, act of love, prove that the declarations, plans, and promises are meaningful and real. We know that Jesus taught us what love is.

In the Book of Matthew chapter 22 (37-40), Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment in all of the law is and he answered....

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Jesus taught us to love God, first and foremost and, second, to love others. One theologian makes the argument that the fullest meaning of this passage is the command to love God and then the reality that out of a love for God, only then will we be able to love others.

Jesus didn't only teach on the greatest commandment of love, Jesus embodied love. Literally, Jesus gave love a body. He was the proof of the willingness of God to do everything necessary to embody, exhibit, and extend love to his creation. Throughout the entirety of his ministry, we see Jesus's love embodied through the way that he centered on people who were on the margins; ignored and minimized by the rest of society. We see the way that Jesus embodied love when he pursued justice over privilege. We see the way that Jesus embodied love when he set the oppressed free and when he befriended the possessed. When no one else would go close to this man - he lived among the tombs so that no one had contact with him, but Jesus leaned in, he wasn't afraid. And as an embodiment of love that showed kindness, he asked him his name.

We see the ways that Jesus embodied love when he included the ignored. When he extended grace to the scorned woman accused of adultery, offering grace while calling her to sin no more. We see the ways that Jesus embodied love when he forfeited power and entered the world as a vulnerable baby. Not only a vulnerable baby born to earthly parents but a vulnerable baby born in the dirt and grime of a stable, laid in a manger under the imposing threats on his life. Contrary to our love of the light, Jesus' love deliberately entered the dark corners of life and society and brought life to it. That's real love.

I've often wondered what that sacrifice truly looks like and the truth of it is that I will never know. Because I've never made the kind of sacrifice that Jesus made to be born on earth. In Philippians 2:6 it describes this sacrifice and what Jesus left. It describes Jesus as:

**Who, being in very nature[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

Love motivated the incarnation; the coming of Jesus to the world. It wasn't just that Jesus had a vital task to complete. The incarnation was motivated by love. This love is the foundation of the miracle of what we celebrate at Christmas. In his incarnation, Jesus left his eternal experience of God's perfect love to demonstrate God's perfect love so that he could welcome us into our own eternal experience of God's perfect love—again, entering the dark places of the world to bring light through love.

And now, the invitation for us this Christmas and always is to allow ourselves to receive the love offered through Jesus. And not to stop there. I don't think that even we could if we tried because the love of Jesus is so transforming that we can't help but to live that love out to others.

In fact, further in the same passage from 1 John 4, in verse 11, we're told

'Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.'

This Christmas, what if expressions of love to one another were an overflow of the love we've experienced through Jesus? What if we allowed Jesus' real love to enter the dark places of our world, and—in entering our dark places—allowed us to not only experience light, but then share and bring that light to others?

What if the love that we've received from Jesus was what allowed us to bring light to the midst of dark times?

What if our love toward others was expressed as a steadiness in the midst of turbulence?

What if our love toward others was expressed as a kind word of empathy and understanding when someone expects to receive rebuke and 'justice'?

What if our love toward others was expressed as safety for a friend who feels the very foundation of their life beginning to crumble?

What if our love toward others was expressed as safety in the midst of someone's fear.

What if our love toward others was expressed as an encouragement to someone's hopelessness.

Thinking back to those images of light often sold as love in this Christmas season:

What if our love toward others was meeting that child in tears about losing the family game with patient encouragement instead of frustrated snapped response.

What if our love toward others was being the first to extend an offer of reconciliation to that fractured relationship?

What if our love toward others was bringing up a joyful memory of a lost loved one into the moment so they're not forgotten and so that we hold space for both grief and joy.

One of the highlights of the Christmas season for me over the last 20 years has been our annual Christmas banquet for our shelter community. They are 'can't miss' events for me. For the first ten years, we held them on Christmas day, meaning that we had about 40 volunteers who would arrive at their scheduled time on Christmas Day to pull together an absolutely beautiful banquet for the community. We now do them on a weeknight in the days leading up to Christmas to maximize the potential for people to participate. (I think we have some photos of our Christmas banquet on the screen here...). When the dinner is in full swing, I always take some moments to stand off to the side and take it in. Breathe in the laughter, watch the integrated tables of people get to know one another, sometimes for the first time. I hear the stories being shared, watch people being helped to their seats. I take in the joy among hard working volunteers serving delicious food and it feels like light. But what I know is true, is that the light of our Christmas banquet is made possible by the determined, gritty, Jesus-following love that is poured into our community day in and day out. By the friendships who choose to show up for one another, even when it's hard. By the kindness expressed in the midst of someone's angry outbursts. By holding to boundaries and accountability (because yes, that's also an expression of love...) By holding on to hope when someone's lost their sight of it. The light of that banquet is fueled and made possible by the love of people who are trying to model their lives after Jesus.

What if we all did a bit more of that? What if the ways that we treated one another, spoke to one another, showed up for one another looked a lot more like Jesus love in this Christmas season? Because, friends, it is not wrong to love light; of course it isn't. But let's not confuse love with light. Light is when everything feels amazing; love is when Jesus enters in and makes a difference when things don't. Let's lean in to be the kind of people who live from a place of being loved so fully and completely by Jesus and allowing that love to be lived out through us. And, in those ways, let us be people who bring love into the darkness, so that we can experience Jesus not only lighting up the dark places of our lives with His love, but leading us to more experiences of the light we most long for.

We don't really love love. We love light. But thankfully, Jesus' love not only brings light into our darkness; He enables us to experience a greater degree of the light.

Let's pray.