

## Advent Love

It is the fourth Sunday of Advent and we *complete the circle* and light the fourth candle... the candle representing the Advent theme of love.



Tonight we'll add the light of the center candle, the scarlet red candle that represents *the center of it all*: Jesus.

This year we've added to our tradition, pairing our celebration of Advent with a celebration of Communion. These weeks of Advent are intended to help us welcome the coming of Jesus. We remember when He came as the Babe of Bethlehem, Emmanuel, God With Us... and we welcome Him. We remember His promise of His coming again to establish His Eternal Kingdom, and we say come Lord Jesus. And, we remember that each and every day gives us a new opportunity to welcome Jesus into our hearts and lives, this third view of Advent by which we say ***come to my heart Lord Jesus***, there is room in my heart.

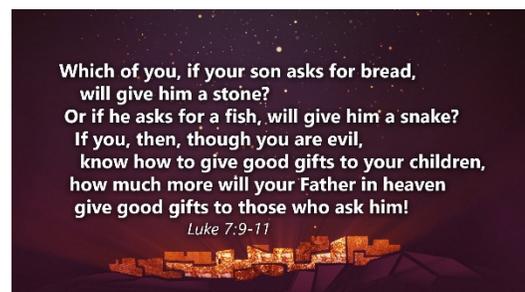
Before we get to the Table (and more serious matters), may I ask: How are things looking under the tree? Are you ready to give some gifts? Are you ready to receive a few?

What is the point of gift giving? Gift giving is an expression of love. When we give gifts, we are saying "I love you." And when we receive gifts, we should understand that we are loved.

I'll tell you that *your staff* here at Northshore felt that love in a tangible way last week as you showered us with gifts. Thank you for overwhelming generosity. We knew that we were loved... and your gifts were a wonderful reminder.

Here's something that Jesus said about gift giving:

<sup>9</sup> "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more



will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!<sup>1</sup>

Both Advent and Communion should call us to be grateful for God's gifts to us. Just as we give gifts to one another as an expression of love, God gives us gifts to express His love for us.

And here's the thing... His gifts are there **before** we even ask. That was certainly the case with God's **best gift**.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

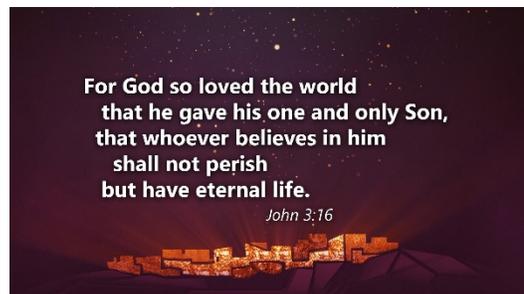
Christmas is first and foremost a celebration of God's love for us, expressed in His most treasured Gift: Jesus... God Himself... Emmanuel, God With Us.

Christmas is the celebration of God's love for us... and Communion is the celebration of God's love for us.

So on this final Sunday of Advent, we light the candle representing God's love, and we come to the Table, prepared with these symbols of God's gift of love.

The Manger expresses the **initiative** of God's love; the Table expresses the **extent** of God's love.

The Table is prepared, inviting us again to receive God's gift of love.



<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 7:9–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Jn 3:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I suppose we could pass by Christmas and not **receive** any gifts. We could simply observe the trappings of it all, the lights and sounds and shiny packages. Wouldn't it be a tragedy to simply take all the wonderfully wrapped packages and send them off to storage? It would be tragic for both the giver and the receiver... the intended recipient would be without the gift, and the giver would be robbed of the joy of giving the gift. Is it really a gift at all until it is received?

Of course we will open the packages waiting under the trees!

Let's be sure to receive God's gift as well. Let's not let this gift pass us by, lost in the packaging, set aside once all of the festivities subside. Unwrap God's gift in the way Jesus taught... by believing in Him. That is how we receive God's gift of love, by believing in Jesus.

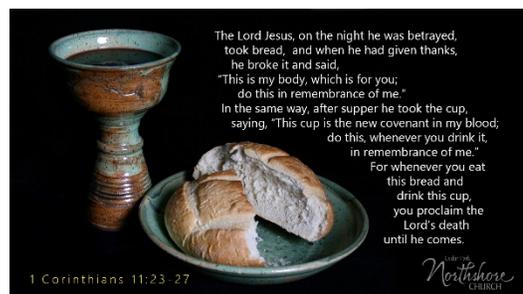
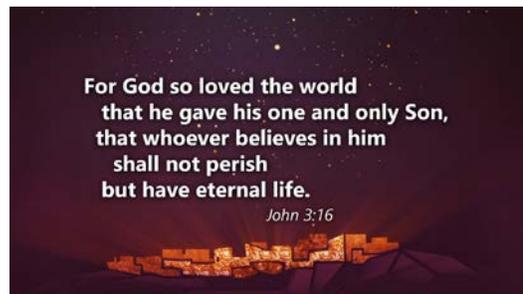
All who are believing are welcomed to the Table to receive God's gift.

Here's how Jesus first invited us:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,<sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."<sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.<sup>3</sup>

Come today. Receive and believe.

- **Celebrate** that God came as a mere human, a baby boy, taking on our frailty in human flesh, His First Advent.
- **Remember** that Jesus promised to return in all His glory, His Second Advent to rule His Kingdom forever.
- And **welcome** Jesus into our hearts again today, we say **Come Lord Jesus**, our *everyday* Advent.



<sup>3</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 11:23-26). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We have said of these four Advent themes that there is both a *vertical* and a *horizontal* dimension to each... a vertical aspect as we consider hope, peace, joy, and love in terms of our relationship with God... and a horizontal aspect as we consider hope, peace, joy, and love in terms of our relationships with one another.



When we came to the Lord's Table, we found opportunity to consider love in the vertical sense, God's love for us.

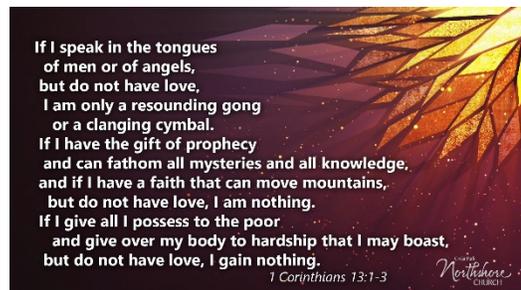
This season gives us opportunity to consider Love in the horizontal sense, love shared among one another.

When considering *God's love for us*, we went to a familiar passage, John 3:16, which spells out, in plain and direct terms, that God so loves us.

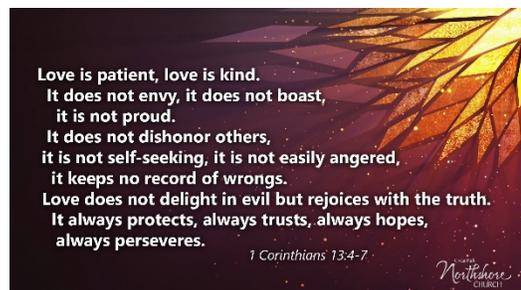
When it comes to *love among one another*, let's consider another passage that might be familiar to many. Even the *least initiated* might find this passage familiar, as it is often read in wedding ceremonies and printed on plaques and such.

Hear these words from chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians.

If I speak in the tongues <sup>1</sup> of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, <sup>4</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

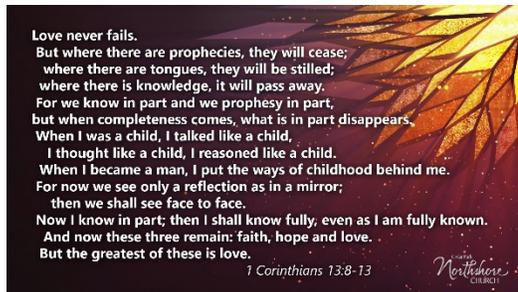


<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.



<sup>8</sup> Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. <sup>12</sup> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

<sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. <sup>4</sup>



Love is the greatest... maybe especially in a season like this. Love is demonstrated among family and friends through generous gift giving. Love is sensed even among strangers as we wish one another well and share in the joy of it all. Love is expressed in broad and general ways as we sacrifice for charity, remembering those in need with both our gifts and our labors.

We may not always get it right, but the intention is there among most of us.

So when *Uncle WhatsHisName* gets on your nerves over dinner (or if you find yourself being *Aunt or Uncle WhatsHisName*)... at least we know where to go for instruction:

Love is patient, love is kind.<sup>5</sup>

Love is both **active** and **passive**. Love is **action**, expressed in all manner of kindness, but it is also **inaction** in that it is patient. It is actively expressed in grace, and passively expressed in mercy.



After these two descriptors of what love **is**, Paul then follows with eight descriptors of what love **is not**:

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 13:1–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 13:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 13:4–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

If we took the time, we could tie each of these eight negative descriptors (what love is not) to behavior in the Corinthian Church that was called out in the previous twelve chapters. Essentially what Paul was saying to the Corinthians was, “If you want to act in love, simply do the opposite of what you’re doing now.” It is harsh... but it appears to be true... true then and still true today.

- Don’t envy – Envy sounds like jealousy or covetousness... the kind of longing for **stuff** that advertisers would like to fan into flame in each of us. Seriously... if we watch much television at all, we might get the idea that most everyone gets a luxury car with a big red bow on top for Christmas. We might be a little jealous if all we get is socks. But envy is usually not so much about longing for **stuff**... but longing for special **relationships**. It is a longing for recognition or favoritism... wanting to be special in a family, a crowd, or even a church. Could Holiday situations provide a breeding ground for envy?
- Don’t boast – Don’t be such a showy *windbag*... a *big talker*.
- Don’t be proud - This verb literally means to be “puffed up,” carrying with it overtones of arrogance.<sup>7</sup>
- Don’t dishonor others – A better translation is likely “don’t be rude.” We shouldn’t exercise our rights, privileges, possessions, or *mouths* in such a way that damages others.
- Don’t be self-seeking - In some ways this is the fullest expression of what Christian love is all about. It does not seek its own; it does not believe that “finding oneself” is the highest good; it is not enamored with self-gain, self-justification, self-worth. To the contrary, it seeks the good of one’s neighbor—or enemy (cf. Phil. 2:4).<sup>8</sup>
- Don’t be easily angered – This is just another way to say “be patient.” Much of what came before was about not angering *others*; here the directive is not be angered *ourselves*. In today’s vocabulary the directive is simple: *Don’t be such a snowflake*.
- Don’t keep track of wrongs – This is just another way to say “forgive”... forgive in such a way that the record is erased. I’m pretty sure that lots of holiday gatherings would be entirely transformed by faithfully applying this one directive.

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<sup>7</sup> Fee, G. D. (1987). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (p. 638). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>8</sup> Fee, G. D. (1987). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (p. 638). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

- Don't delight in evil – Delighting in evil means that we have to convince ourselves of a lies... that wrong is right, that bad is good, that foolishness is wisdom. We are called to Truth, not merely *confronting* or *enduring* the Truth... but **rejoicing** in the Truth... delighting in what is right, good, and wise.

Finally in defining love, the text says:

<sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>9</sup>

There is a sort of *sandwich* depicted in these four descriptors. The middle two are future-focused, while the first and last are present-focused.

**Protecting** and **persevering** are the actions of love *now*, while **trusting** and **hoping** are *future-focused* motivations for today's acts of love.

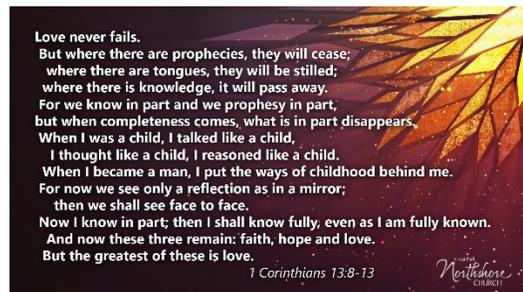
Trusting and hoping look forward, all the way through eternity.

Finally the text says:

Love never fails.

and

these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.<sup>10</sup>



Love is the both the highest goal and the foundation... the base on which everything rests, and the goal to which everything stretches.

Now, as it was in the Church in Ancient Corinth, the Church is marked with these three aspects of the Kingdom of God: faith, hope, and love.

- We have **faith** that the Kingdom of God is real, that we are God's and He is ours,
- We have **hope** for that Great Eternity, that the Kingdom of God will be fully and finally realized, and
- We have **love**, the Kingdom of God working in us and through us, **now** and through eternity.

Is it at all strange that one would be held over the others? Why is “the greatest of these” love?

<sup>9</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 13:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>10</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 13:13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

There is not faith and hope awaiting us in Eternity; we will see Jesus face to face. Faith and hope will be fully realized. The only thing that will endure, the only thing that lasts, the only thing that continues in Eternity is **love**.

That is why love is the *life breath*. That is why love is so vital. That is why love is truly the greatest of these. That is why we must know what love is, and act only in love.

Acting in love... life among one another in the horizontal, this is our goal.

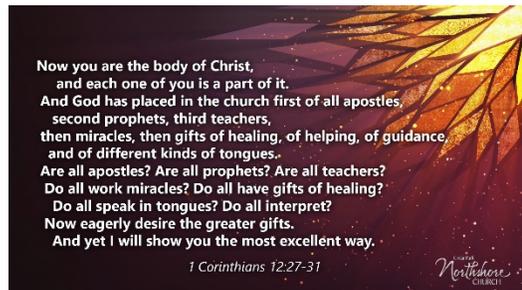
Could love as the Bible demands even be possible? Does it sound impossible? It could be impossible... especially if we are only thinking *horizontally*.

These melodious verses about love exist in a context. Before the beginning of Chapter 13 comes the end of Chapter 12; remembering that context gives us an important perspective, and even hope for carrying all of this out.

Chapter 12 contains instructions about operating with Spiritual Gifts (the kinds of things we'll be studying on Sunday nights starting January 7).

Here are the last verses of Chapter 12:

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way. <sup>11</sup>



God expresses His love for the Church by giving all sorts of gifts. Some are in the form of roles (prophets, teachers, and such), others are in the form of action (helping, serving, healing, miracles, speaking in tongues, and such). They are *God's gifts*, so of course they are all **good** gifts. But there is a greater gift, a most excellent way. That *way* is **love**. That *gift* is **love**.

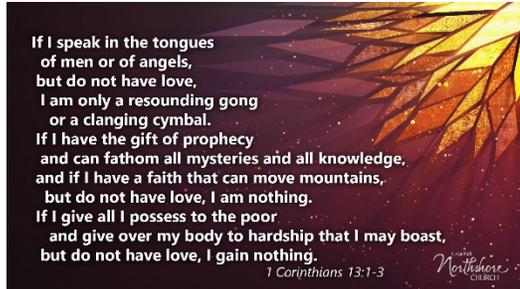
Love is a gift.

Possessing that gift is the key to this all.

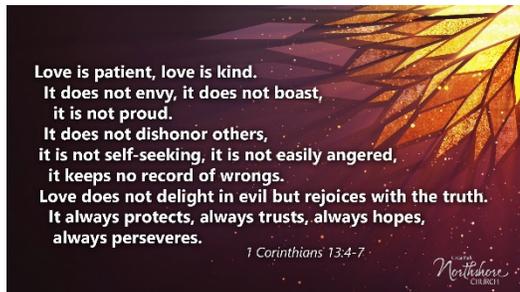
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<sup>11</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (1 Co 12:27-31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Without possessing God's gift of love, this can all be **exhausting**... impossible really. Without God's gift of love, every action is just hollow noise, "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."



If we find that living according to the *law of love* is exhausting, if patience and kindness and forgiveness and selflessness *and all* exhaust us... then it must be that it is coming from an exhaustible source.



And what is that exhaustible source? Us...

we are an exhaustible source, some with more capacity than others, but we are all exhaustible.

If we find ourselves exhausted by love, we are not doing it right.

We are called to draw from the inexhaustible source: God.

We are not called to give love merely out of our limited sources, even out of our emptiness. Rather, we are called to be conduits of God's love.

We are called to *re-gift*. To *pay it forward*. We are called to receive God's gift of love and then share and spread that love. The more we give that kind of love away, the more we enjoy the abundance of God's inexhaustible love.

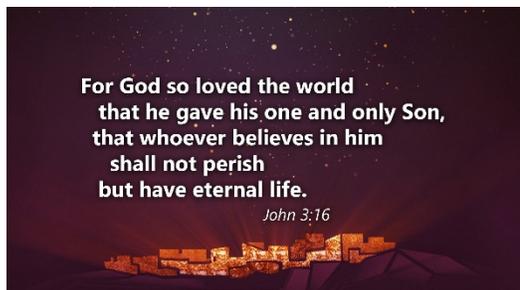
So, once again, I call us to **receive** God's gift of love this Christmas.

Unwrap God's gift and receive!

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.<sup>12</sup>

Let's believe!

Let's believe so we can receive the gift of God's love. And let's believe so we can give the gift of love.



<sup>12</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Jn 3:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.