

## Advent Love

I suppose that with all of the distractions that seem to go along with the season, it could be easy for us to lose *connection* to Jesus. Perhaps not as bad as that *clueless fellow* on the video... but let's be honest... sometimes we forget *that guy*... that one guy who not only gives meaning to the season, but meaning to our entire lives.



We do all we can to keep that connection to Jesus strong during the season. One of the ways we do that is with these four traditional themes: Hope, Peace, Joy, and now today's theme, Love.

So we light the fourth candle and turn our attention to what is arguably the greatest of the four: Love.



There is a contemporary Christmas song that Dan and I have been singing this season that center's our attention on today's theme. Perhaps you've heard it, perhaps not; we've been looking forward to sharing it with you today.

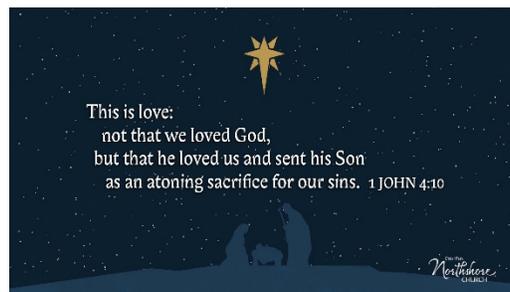
[This is Love]

<sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.<sup>1</sup>

Christmastime is often flooded with all sorts of expressions of love. There are expressions of love for *one another*.

Apparently, based on what it seems most every commercial on television is telling us, everyone is getting a **car** or truck for Christmas!

Well... it may not be that most of us receive anything quite so extravagant. Nevertheless, there will be lots of expressions of love these days, just like every Christmas. There will be gifts and special meals, traditions cherished and time spent together.



<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And there are, of course, expressions of love **toward God** this time of year. Some do so with gifts to the Church or charity, many make special efforts to *show up* at worship services at Christmas. I wasn't much of a Christian until I was 20... but I still often found myself in church, with friends or extended family, on and around Christmas.

But the central meaning of Christmas is not merely the love we express for one another, or even the love we express towards God. The heart of Christmas is how God **defined love** by sending His Son.

This is love: the **Incarnate-King**-of-everything decided to be a common girl's baby... the **Begotten Son**. God chose to make His home among us, and in us.

<sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God<sup>2</sup>...

Not to belittle the love we have for God, but to acknowledge how our love for God can never bridge the divide... our love, no matter how devout or extravagant, cannot conquer sin. When the task is **God and man to reconcile**, our love for God (nor our fear of God, nor our sacrifice for God, nor anything we can muster) can suffice. **God and man to reconcile** is a God-sized task that can only be accomplished by God's love... God's love for us, for you and for me.

<sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son<sup>3</sup>

This is the heart of Christmas. We cannot lose our grip on the connection between all that we celebrate and God's gift of Love. He loved us and sent his Son. Baby Jesus and King Jesus, Baby Jesus and Resurrected Jesus, Baby Jesus and Crucified Jesus, Baby Jesus and the teacher, miracle worker, preacher... **same guy** as the video put it.

Let's be sure to receive God's gift of love... especially during these wonderful, holy days. Not merely settling for the wrappings and trappings of it all during this season, but receiving Jesus in our hearts, again or even for the first time. Receiving the miracle of the Christ Child, and the insurmountable gift from our God who loves us so much that He suffered and died so that we can live with Him forever. This is Love!

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<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

**Receiving** God's gift of Love is of utmost importance... but that is not all. Consider the passage that surrounds this one verse in 1 John 4:

<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

**Receiving** the love of God should inevitably lead to **sharing** the love of God. It seems that there cannot be an *unloving Christian* when we read the plain words of Scripture:

<sup>8</sup> Whoever does not **love** does not know God, because God is love. <sup>4</sup>

Encountering the love of God should change us. **God's** selfless act drives out *our* selfishness. God's sacrifice for us calls us to sacrifice for others.

It is not my job to decide who is a Christian and who is not. It seems my roles are more in *marketing* and *production*; I'm glad to leave *quality-control* up to God. Nevertheless... this passage gives us a measure by which we can examine ourselves.

Here's how the chapter ends:

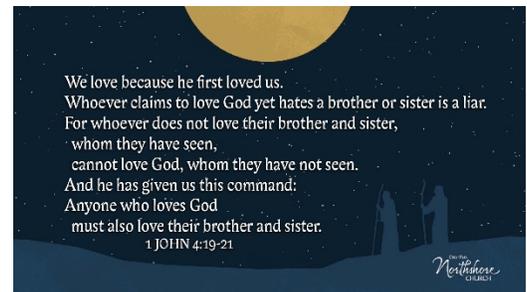
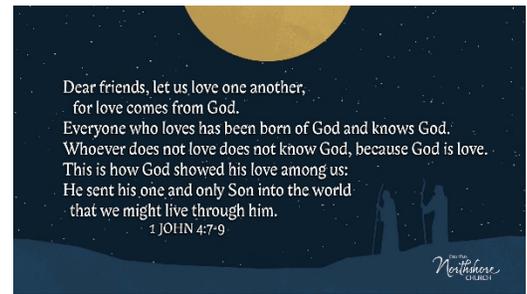
<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. <sup>5</sup>

God's Love is incompatible with hate.

We can **hate** sin and the devil. We can **hate** cancer and injustice. We can even hate brussels sprouts. (Will anyone have any of those weird, stinky little cabbages on their table this Christmas?)

But we cannot hate one another; we cannot hate a brother or a sister.

So...who are our *brothers and sisters*?



<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:7–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:19–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Normally when we talk about *brothers and sisters*, we are talking about close family relationships. I suspect that most will have some family around in the coming days. In addition to our sons, and new daughter, we'll have all of Laurie's family around, but we'll use technology to connect with my family. This is an important time to connect with family.

But John is talking about more than mere relatives... more than the *family of blood*, the *family of faith*. A bit of study reveals that it is clear that when John says "brothers and sisters," his primary meaning is the love Christians have for one another as they serve one another, and worship together.

Jesus taught that one of the most powerful ways that people will know that Christianity is real is by the love Believers have for one another. It is impossible to argue that there is a place for hate within the Church.

But is the circle around the *family of faith* the boundary for hate? Is everyone outside of the faith *fair game*?

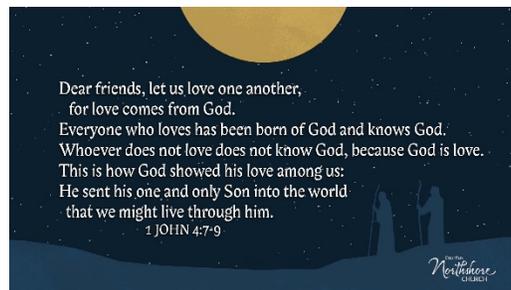
Who is our *brother and sister*? Just within the *family of blood*? Our text clearly identifies brothers and sisters as the *family of faith*. But could brothers and sisters include the entire *family of humanity*? Who are our *brothers and sisters*?

Jesus said that we should love our neighbor as ourselves... and when someone asked "who is my neighbor?" the question could include "who is my *brother and sister*?" Jesus answered by telling a story... a story of one who was mugged, beaten up by robbers. Three people came by, but only one acted with love... only one was a *neighbor*, or *brother*, to the one in need. It wasn't a relative... not even one of the same race. It wasn't a co-believer... they did not share the same faith. It was that Good Samaritan. Jesus identified *that one* as the neighbor, the one who acted with love. It wasn't blood or faith that qualified that one in need... it was his *need* that qualified him.

I'm certain that if we asked Jesus "who are our *brothers and sisters*?" He would tell us that **our** *brothers and sisters* are the same that **He** considers *brothers and sisters*... and that includes the entire *family of humanity*.

**This is the Love of God that we receive and celebrate at Christmas. Our text declares it. God sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live.**

**We were not family. We were not believers.**



Romans 5 says it plainly:

Christ died for the ungodly.<sup>6</sup>

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>7</sup>

This is not only our reality to **experience**; it is our calling to **carry out**.

In Bethlehem's manger, the gift of God's love came wrapped in a borrowed stall (and, moments before that, God came wrapped in the womb of a common virgin).

Today, God's gift of love comes wrapped in *the likes of us*... God resides in the hearts and lives of believers. Not merely in our religion and celebrations, not merely in our programs and systems and such... but in our hearts and lives, demonstrated by our transformed lives and sacrificial actions.

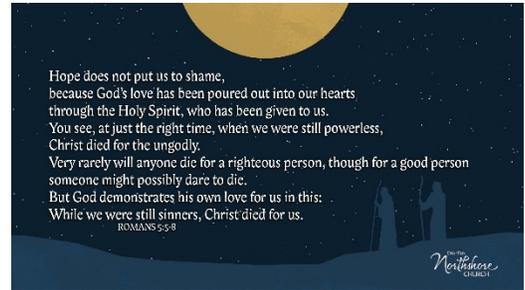
Verse 12 puts it like this.

<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.<sup>8</sup>

Back in our days in the Midwest, we had a favorite preacher, Jeanie Mayo. She would often put it like this: *Jesus with skin on*. We are called to be *Jesus with skin on*.

The Holy Spirit works in and through the lives of believers... believers who are today's embodiment of Jesus. Jesus wrapped in the lives of people working together as the Church. *Jesus with skin on*.

In this very real way, the Incarnation is meant to continue. God took on human flesh, starting with that Baby in Bethlehem. And God continues to work through human flesh by His Spirit working in and through the lives of believers.



<sup>6</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 5:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>7</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 5:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>8</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:11–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The text says:

In this world we are like Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

We are like Jesus in that believers have a powerful relationship with God.

We are like Jesus in that we can be confident in God's love, and His power working through us.

And we are also, now, operating as the *likeness* of Jesus.

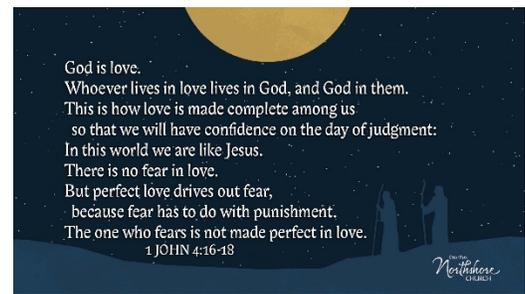
Many of you know that I have a background in administration, working on the *administrative side* of ministry for a long time, mostly in Christian Higher Education. I even earned an MBA a long time ago. So I've studied this stuff and have some level of *expertise*. I know that some of the most critical decisions that a leader makes have to do with delegation. When there is big, important work to do, I can't think of decisions that are more important than deciding who is going to be tasked how, and what authority and responsibility will be passed along to the delegates. Delegation decisions are often the most important decisions.

Think of it... Jesus makes us his delegates. Jesus has passed on His work, authority, and responsibility to those He saved and filled with His Spirit. God's gift of Love continues to be alive and available today... through His people, through the love His People express on God's behalf.

Isn't that awesome? It is an awesome privilege... and an awesome responsibility, especially in these days.

As the video encouraged us, we have unique opportunities to connect others to Jesus during Christmas. We have unique opportunities to demonstrate His love through us in gatherings and celebrations. And we have this great opportunity to remind people that Christmas isn't merely about Santa and Frosty and Buddy the Elf, it isn't even *only* about *Baby Jesus*... but about God's gift of Love... Jesus Christ, our Savior, who chose to make His home in us.

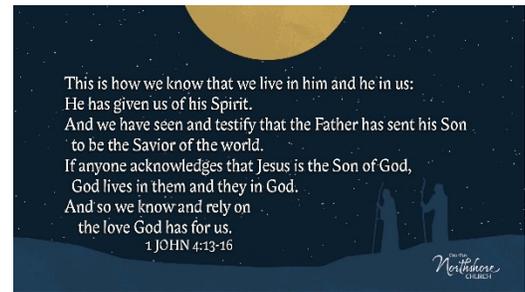
Our greatest expression of Love is to connect people to *Love Incarnate*: Jesus. We connect people to Jesus through our service and sacrifice, our words and actions, and demonstrations of love.



<sup>9</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Today is a day to believe.

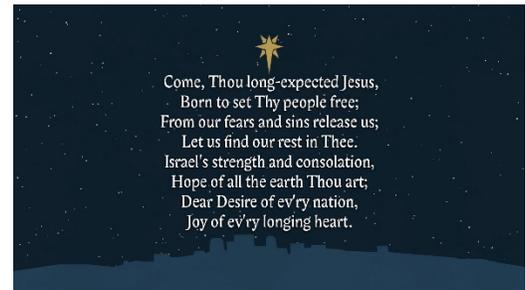
<sup>13</sup> This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. <sup>10</sup>



Hear the Spirit's call today. Believe and receive God's gift of Love. Acknowledge today that Jesus is so much more than a mere figure at the center of a nativity scene; Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

In this Advent season here at Northshore, we have been praying the prayer found in the Advent Hymn: *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*.

During this season of longing, this season of anticipating that Jesus is coming, we can pray this song and invite Jesus to come.



We celebrate that He *has* come.

- Born to deliver
- Born a King
- Born to reign, not merely over us, but in us.



And we invite Him again into our hearts and lives.

Would you sing that prayer with us, or pray that song? Would you take a step of faith? Perhaps a first step of faith, or a step back to faith after a long time away, or simply another step of faith. We long for God, His presence, and deliverance... and we celebrate now. We rejoice.

<sup>10</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:13–16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And as we sing and pray, let's invite Jesus to use us to express His love for those in our networks. In our gatherings and celebrations, back in our workplaces and schools and neighborhoods and such... perhaps especially in our families... let's be available as Christ's ambassadors of love.

Jesus would you not only come into our hearts and lives, but invade our networks, using us to spread your gift of Love.

