

Rediscover Love

1 John 4:7-16, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Slide 1

As you know, this is the season of Advent. Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” It’s a season marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing.

Advent isn’t just an extension of Christmas, it’s a rediscovery of Christmas. It’s meant to remind us of how the Israelites were longing for the coming of the Messiah.

Advent offers us the opportunity to celebrate His birth and to reflect on what it means that Jesus came into the world.

During this Advent series I’ve talked about how Christ gives us hope in our uncertainties and how He brings us joy in our discouragements.

Today, we’re going to look at how Jesus brings us love despite our differences. We’re going to look at how the story of Christmas is really the story of the Gospel.

1 John 4:7-16, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, 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 is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.”

As we’ve journeyed through Advent, we’ve looked at different people in the Nativity story.

We’ve dug into their experiences, but today I’d like to take a different approach. I’d like to look at all the people in the Biblical account of Christ’s birth.

When we do this, we realize that the birth of Christ brought together a wide variety of people across many different divides. So, what am I trying to do? I want you to understand that love unites people.

Slide 2

As we walk through the Christmas story, we started with Zechariah and Elizabeth, then Mary and Joseph—the old and the young.

After Jesus was born, the young couple was then united with two more senior adults, Simeon and Anna. This helps us understand that love unites generations.

Women. Women are featured very prominently in the story of Jesus’ birth. In fact, Matthew includes women in Jesus’ genealogy.

And, stunningly for a Jewish writer of the day, he included the names of five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.

Much of Luke’s gospel tells the story from the point of view of women, from Elizabeth and Mary sharing pregnancy stories with one another to Mary *“treasuring all these things in her heart.”*

Not to mention that Joseph was about to break off the engagement with Mary until the angel talked him out of it. Love unites genders.

Then, Matthew 2 tells us that “*wise men from the east*” came to Jerusalem to worship Jesus.

What was “*the east?*” We’re not entirely sure. Most think they came from Persia, but others think they may have come all the way from China. More importantly, they were Gentiles, not Jews.

Their inclusion in Jesus’s birth story echoes the radical idea that Christ the Messiah brings salvation and restoration to all people, not just the Jews.

Isn’t it also interesting that Matthew, the most Jewish Gospel, is the one that tells this part of the story, while Luke, a Gentile, tells about the infant Jesus presented at the Temple? Love unites cultures.

Then there are the lowly shepherds. Shepherds were considered the bottom rung of social classes.

Their testimony wasn’t even allowed in court, yet they were among the first to get the news of the Messiah’s birth.

And Mary and Joseph, couldn’t even afford the customary sacrifice of a lamb, and had to substitute the poor person’s offering of two doves. Love unites classes.

Finally, we see the shepherds and angels come together: beings of earth and beings of heaven, the physical and the spiritual.

Creation itself gets into the act. A star guides the wise men, and stable animals witness the birth of the Messiah. Love unites creation.

The cast of characters God assembled for the arrival of His Son on earth is far from the expectations any of us could've imagined, and probably even farther from the expectations of the people of that time.

To us, it might seem like a ragtag bunch, but to the religious teachers of the day, it was downright blasphemous.

They couldn't visualize the Messiah would be born so lowly or that He would associate with the full spectrum of unclean humanity and creation, but that's what the love of Christ does.

It builds bridges between people that would otherwise be divided by age, gender, social class, culture, or religion.

Could Jesus have united any more divisions simply by being born? I don't think so, as this pretty much covered them all. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ...

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

So, how could such a simple birth do so much to bring people together? Jesus can do that because love is embodied in Christ.

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Now, the Bible talks about love in many places. Because God is love, the Bible is His love story for all humanity.

From Creation, God made people and shared time with them in the garden as companions and children.

When sin entered the world, bringing death, brokenness, and separation, He continued to work and covenant with humans.

Through generations and generations, He worked His plans and promised a Messiah to make a way to restore His relationship with humanity.

This relationship with God that He brings us into is a relationship of love.

As I read earlier, John eloquently described the love of God in 1 John 4. In fact, those verses talked about love more than any other section of the Bible. I read them again.

In verse 10 it says that God sent His Son to be the “*atoning sacrifice*” for our sins.

1 John 4:10, “*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*”

In other translations of the Bible, instead of the phrase “*atoning sacrifice*” the word “*propitiation*” is used.

Propitiation means “a payment for” or “satisfaction of.” Jesus came to cover our sin, to pay our debt. God personifies love. Love is His nature, and He has shown it to us by sending Jesus.

When we come to Jesus, giving Him our lives, we’re restored to love. We’re fulfilled in love. We live in Him, and He lives in us.

We can count on God’s love; it won’t let us down. It fills us and fuels us. It calls us and enables us to love each other, which brings us to our third point, love defines Christians.

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Jesus brought this reconnection and restoration to love when He entered the world.

Near the end of His earthly ministry, as He gathered with His twelve disciples for their last Passover meal together, He tells them:

John 13:34-35, *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

Jesus wants to make sure they love like He does. Only by the love they show to other people will people know that they’re His followers.

So, how will people know we’re Christians? By our love. Love is what defines us. It marks us and characterizes us, at least it should.

This is why we must also examine ourselves. None of us are perfect, as individuals or as a collective Church.

Yet each of us can find opportunities in this Christmas season, and in our current cultural climate, to allow God’s love to flow through us to others.

The fourth century theologian Jerome told the story of the Apostle John, who lived in Ephesus until extreme old age.

His disciples had to carry him to church and when he arrived, he couldn’t muster the voice to speak many words.

During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, *“Little children, love one another.”*

The disciples and brothers in attendance were annoyed because they always heard the same words, so one day they asked, *“Teacher, why do you always say this?”*

He replied, *"Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."* On that note, we move to our final point, love restores what is broken.

Slide 5

We live in divided times. Division between red states and blue states. Division between vaxxers and anti-vaxxers. Our culture, our nation, our world, and our people have multiplied the ways to divide us.

But the “us” and “them” is actually nothing new. There’s been “us” versus “them” since the Tower of Babel.

That’s why Jesus’s teaching was so radical. In Matthew 5:43-44, Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Throughout His ministry Jesus continually reached across the chasm of separation and exclusion. He befriended hated tax collectors, and even invited one, Matthew, to follow as one of His twelve disciples.

He taught that if a despised Roman soldier forced you to carry his pack for a mile you were to carry it two miles.

He even spoke with a Samaritan woman at the well, which broke a couple of societal taboos. Remember, Jews didn’t associate with Samaritans.

Jewish men especially didn’t talk with women like this in public. In fact, one of Jesus’s most famous parables made the hero of the story a Samaritan.

Jesus was constantly seeking to bring people together, to cross borders, tear down barriers, reach out above the disagreements, and He did it through love.

1 John 4:18, *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”*

Love overcomes the fear “of the other.” The others who may not look like us or sound like us or share the same perspective or experience as us.

Slide 6

Conclusion

Have you ever thought about how completely and totally different we are from God? We might be made in His image, but left on our own, we have absolutely nothing in common with Him.

He’s eternal. We are mortal. He’s Spirit. We’re flesh. He’s holy. We’re sinful. Our sins separate us from Him.

But Christ came and closed the gap between Holy God and sinful man:

2 Corinthians 5:14-21, *“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Did you catch that last part? God made Jesus, Who knew no sin, to be sin for us. God made Him like us so He could make us like Him. You see, we were enemies with God because of our sin.

And, I don't think it was a coincidence that Jesus worked in a carpenter shop until He began His public ministry.

When God's people turned against Him, He was given a cross of wood by the Roman soldiers. His feet and hands were nailed to that cross of wood.

Jesus used that wood and those nails to build a bridge between two enemies. This morning, if you would like to cross that bridge and be reconciled to God, you can do that.