

SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

SERMON: "Love" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Each week in Advent, for 4 weeks now, the table is full. We have been focusing on each of the traditional themes of Advent waiting. We have looked at what those words mean and why they matter. Hope, Peace, Joy, and now Love. Love appears in the Bible in its form and sentiment more than any of the others. Love, in fact, even has 3 different definitions that appear in the Bible, 3 different kinds of love. There is *eros*, that erotic love. There is *philio*, the brotherly love. And then there is *agape*, the love that God pours out so often, the love that Jesus demonstrates throughout his life, his death and his resurrection. *Agape* is total and complete love for the other. Love appears in many forms and in many ways. It is at the root and heart of what we do.

Gene Outka describes love as a positive regard for others. And while I used to chafe at that definition because it just seemed so clinical, it does put the emphasis in two places that I think are critically important. First, the positive regard – that we actually have an outpouring of something positive, no matter what it is, some sort of gift that we freely and willingly give to the other – positive regard for the other.

Probably my favorite definition of love, though, or at least the description of love, comes from Julian Barnes. In his wonderful and crazy book "The History of the World" in 10-1/2 chapters. There is a chapter about love. It is that half chapter. It is called "Parenthesis." Barnes says two things about love that I really want you to hold onto today. One is this: Love is the one thing in the whole world that keeps the history of the world and everything that is happening in it from being totally and utterly ridiculous, that without love everything and anything that happens is like that noisy gong from Corinthians. It means nothing without love. The second piece for Barnes is that love doesn't create happiness by what it does. Rather, it creates the conditions that each and every one of us may grow into our fullness. Love is the only thing that keeps things real, and that love produces fullness.

This wonderful story that we read, the story of encounter between Gabriel and Mary, this unbelievable question and answer. You won't find the word *love* in it. You even have to look hard to find an actual definition of love in this story. But this morning, I'm not so concerned about what love is, not love as a *what* or a thing. But instead if you look through this story, it is dripping with *why*. These actions in this story and the characters who are so closely connected to this story are all inherently driven by and tied up in a motivation of love. And that is what I want us to spend some time thinking about today.

There is first that angel Gabriel who comes down to visit Mary. Not a word of love does he speak, but his motivations, his aspect, his approach are all about love. "Don't fear, Mary. Greetings, favored one." Positive regard for the other, right? But remember, his message is all about God coming to offer the gift of love to all of humanity. Remember John 3:16: "For God so *loved* the world." The angel comes, maybe not with love on his lips, but love as his purpose.

And Mary! First, her positive regard for others, the fact that she was able to stand there and think about the implications of this savior coming for the whole world, and what that would mean for her people who were in such pain, who were in such sorrow, who were losing hope rapidly. Kind of like us maybe. It was love that allowed her to keep from running away and hiding under the covers, love that allowed her to respond to the angel with questions: "Tell me, how could this be?" A question framed in love. How do I know this, because it doesn't say this here, but here's how I know it. Do you remember Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist? Well, an angel came to him saying that the same thing was about to happen to Elizabeth. Zechariah asked almost the same question as Mary did, and Zechariah was struck mute for 9 months until after John the Baptist was born. But there was something in the way that Mary asked this nearly identical question, I believe, that the angel knew it was coming from a place of love. It was coming from a place of openness. And so instead of punishment, there was engagement. Instead of any recrimination, there was blessing. The questions came from love, love that allowed this story not to be one of obligation or compulsion, but a willing embrace of something so far beyond imagination, so far beyond what we could possibly imagine.

And it's not just in this immediate story, but all the characters who surround this story where love would be. Joseph, that quiet Joseph – love is pouring forth as he honored her, as he honored their relationship, as he supported her. It had to be love. And of course, Elizabeth, when Mary would come to visit her, Elizabeth – ah, her baby leapt in joy for the love that was coming through the door. It would be love eventually in Bethlehem that caused some innkeeper to at least offer a stable with hay, so that all of this might unfold. Love, it is the *why* of this story.

Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that he was so thankful that God called him to love everyone, even though he didn't have to like them. Love them, because remember, that is the way we transform ourselves into the full image of God. I love that quote from Dostoevsky – when we love somebody it is to recognize the fullness of God's image in that person. In fact, throughout those Bible quotes, love is at the heart and center not of *what* we do, but *why* we do it. "Let love be genuine." "Reach out to others in love." In everything that you do, may it be done in love.

In Advent, there is so much to do. I ran into somebody on the way to the post office the other day, who said "Oh my goodness, I'm so far behind," with a stack of Christmas cards this high. I

told them “Don’t worry, you’re probably in the top 25% of everybody.” There is so much to do right now. And what I don’t want you to worry about is the *what* of it all. Instead, I want you to be consumed by the *why* of it all. Let the *why* guide everything that you’re doing, whether it’s traditional or not, or scandalous or not, whether it makes sense or not. Because if love guides everything that you do, I promise it will be just what the moment needs.

This Advent, it has been hard, hasn’t it? It has been long, hasn’t it? It has demanded so much from so many, and left us rather than gathering, sometimes so isolated. And I know that I will never forget this Advent. But not because of any of that. No, hopefully, all of that I might forget. But I will never forget this Advent, because from the depth of my being, I have seen so much love. Not in the *what*, but in the *why*.

I got so many texts yesterday from love. Love that took the shape of bread. Hundreds of loaves of bread, hand baked, homemade, and delivered to people’s houses. Is that what love looks like? I don’t know. But you need to know that behind it all was love, which led people to talk about Christmas miracles in their texts to me. “I don’t know how this loaf showed up on my door,” some of them wrote. I know. It showed up because of love.

On Friday, we spent 3-1/2 hours recording 2 worship services that are coming for you, so that Sandor could come back here. And I know this – the only reason it worked is because of love. Jack Brown and Deb McMenemy, who dedicated their whole afternoon to being here. After that service, so you know what they told me? How overjoyed they were to be able to do it. How much it was all bathed in love is what they were talking about, even if they never used those words. Their hearts and their minds were alive, and that’s why it worked. Sandor told me that when he came in this place, it felt like coming home, because it felt like love.

That giant Advent wreath out front, is that what love looks like? I don’t know. But I know that love was behind it. I know that Michael Deegan spent hour after hour lathing out hundreds of wooden poles so that the labyrinth might take shape. I know that Elizabeth Young spent hours upon hours making magnets and writing out quotes on Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. I know that so many, like the Smiths, and the Russells, Don Eaton and Ted Randolph spent time decorating the trees and getting it all ready to go. And you know what? The reason it’s so wonderful is because love animated it all.

The Giving Tree, with Charlotte and Anne and their crew, all of those gifts will go out. And the reason they will be love is because all of you shopped in love.

The virtual caroling that Jill Wheat put together because she loves. Not just kids and engaging them, but she loves the people for whom those carols will be dedicated. You want to talk about love – Diane Piraino showed up in a freezing cold sanctuary to play for hours on her bells to get it right, until those could go out as her carols.

This Advent, I will remember to the depth of my heart, not just because of *what* has happened in this place, but because of you and the fact that it’s all been driven by a sense of love. Friends, this place is so amazing. We are the people of God because we do things out of love. And so

whatever you do in this coming Advent season, make sure that it is done with love. And if it is, it will be perfect.

There is one more story about love I need to share with you, and about people in this church. It's not related to Christmas, it's related to Easter. It's related to two people, whose names I won't mention because they love to serve in humbleness. Two people who spend hours and hours each year turning the cross into a flowered cross. And when I came afterwards to offer them some thanks, the chance to go out and share a meal together in celebration, they turned to me and said "Brent, that's not necessary. We did it because we love." May that be our animating force.

I'm going to read something in closing from Corinthians. "Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no records of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Friends, love never fails."

Let it not just be the *what* of everything we do, but the *why*. And if we do, it will be worthy of the One who is about to come in that manger. It will be worthy of our mission as a church. It will mean that Christ has indeed been born to us and in us on this day. Friends, there is nothing more important. Let's get to it. Because precious little time remains until that precious gift of Love comes to us once again on a silent night. Amen.