

Weekly Study of Sunday's Message.

Sunday December 22, 2019. "Advent Conspiracy. Love All. Love."

I Intro.

Welcome to the weekly devotional that gives you some specific things to work thru from the message this past Sunday. Whether you were able to attend the worship service or not, this devotional is free-standing and you can still use it to help you dig deeper into your own spiritual walk. Take as long as you need to dive into this material and feel free to share it.

II Recap.

This is the last Sunday in our season of Advent. The inner preparation for not just Christmas...but the coming of Jesus. The first week we talked about hope and tied it to the practice of worship. Not just attending church, but growing an awareness that God is everywhere. If we can work to grow that awareness, actively regularly worship, then we can grow hope also. The second week we talked about Peace. We find it by finding wholeness/completeness in our relationship with God, not chasing the things of the world. Then last week we said Joy is a steady understanding of the presence of God in our every moment that can hold us in place no matter what's happening around us. Advent is the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day, and it gives us a focused time of work to prepare ourselves for making sure Christmas does a good work within us.

III Sunday.

Sunday we finished the final in this four week series of Advent. To prepare...yes for the coming of Christmas. But also to do the inner work to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Sunday was about love, the foundation and key to the other three Advent themes. If we can learn to cultivate a life that grows our ability to love all, unconditionally, then we will experience hope, peace and joy. Deep, powerful expressions of each, and all of those that will help us weather the storms and difficulties of life. To talk about love, we'll start with the traditional Christmas story passage to set the conversation, and then get to our primary passage. So read **Luke 2:8-10** and answer a few questions.

What do you think this night was like. Paint an imaginative picture.

Now...what does "good news" for "all people" mean to you?

What is the good news? And who are all people?

We are so close to Christmas now it's hard to focus enough to consider spiritual things. We're excited about seeing family, eating, exchanging gifts, eating, taking time off, maybe some travel, did I mention eating? And in all of those plans we're pushing aside not just the story of the birth of Jesus, but what exactly that birth meant to us.

So the next passage 'forces' us...in a gentle way, to engage this last theme of Advent, love, and ask ourselves; **"Does our life reflect, and do we regularly practice, the type of love shown in the Christmas story?"**

Let's read the primary passage and unpack the truths about love from it. You can find it in **Matthew 22:33-40**. Go ahead and read it and answer the questions.

What jumped out to you about this passage?

What does it say to you about the relationship with love and how we live out our faith?

Kal said there were three things, (of course he did...he's a preacher and everything comes in threes), that come from this passage about the nature of love. And truths if we can incorporate them into our lives will help us to live into this last theme of loving all more fully.

1. Biblical love is love in which both the other, and the relationship flourishes.

Let's look at what flourish means. **Flourish- (def) to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment. To grow beyond what we could have achieved solely on our own, and know even greater growth is available.**

A true scriptural understanding and practice of love on this scale is one that helps everyone around us continually be a better version of themselves, not to be like us. It creates healthy environments and pours into others to encourage them to do the things they need in their own life to grow.

Who and how did someone from your past help you flourish?

2. In order for others to 'flourish' there must be a 'shrinking' of me.

This truth is hard...it 'feels' like we're sacrificing our own needs, goals, etc, conflict. Because we are. What is this shrinking of self? There is a mystic Jewish word; **Zimzum** that means; "*self-imposed contraction of self.*" You intentionally and purposefully lessen yourself, your wants and needs for the flourishing of another. It's what parents do when they have kids. You make the house kid proofed, get the mini-van, vacations are different, everything has spit up on it, and more. AND...it's what God did in creation, on the cross, and in the birth of Jesus. In order to love in this more powerful and mature way, not based on how we feel, we have to contract ourselves.

When was a time you felt you had to sacrifice, lessen, contract yourself in order to love?

How difficult was this to do? Why?

3. This kind of love has to be muscular.

This is a weird and unusual word to use about love, but it highlights the truth that to love like this is a decision, **work**, an attitude, an intentional commitment of growing into a deeper expression of love. To desire and work for the betterment, thriving, flourishing of another, you have to love God and others with **ALL** of who you are and what you have. It's like moving something heavy. If you don't give it EVERYTHING, nothing is happening. To love like this isn't waiting for the feeling to love. It's a commitment to love no matter what. And it's only for the strong.

When have you had to go above and beyond to practice muscular love? What was it like?

Even though love is the last of the four Advent themes it is the foundational one. If you can love well and in all circumstances, and you have to grow the ability to love like that the others, hope, peace, and joy will all come. And you will find the life you are looking for.

This is our last devotional for 2019. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and we'll see you Jan 5th.