

Weekly Study of Sunday's Message

December 21 2025 "Advent: "Love is made real by action"

I Intro.

We've flown through Advent. This is the final Sunday before Christmas. Advent was our time of preparation for the coming of The Christ. And that time is now here. Things will shut down for the rest of 2025, and then kick back up after the first of the year. Stay connected to our social media to keep up with everything that's happening. Welcome to our companion devotional to Sunday's message. It's just a part of all we have to offer to you. Whether you were able to participate in this service or not, this devotion is free-standing. We hope you find this tool helpful on your spiritual journey. We don't want you to miss out on anything. We consider you part of our community. We have many ways you can plug into life at NCC. You can find all those through our website, app, and social media sites. Our app is the best way to livestream our services, but you can also livestream on FaceBook and YouTube. You can revisit past services, sign up for events and even give. We're encouraged by your presence when you gather with us. New and familiar faces join us every Sunday. If you join us online, we appreciate your presence. We are fully committed to our virtual attenders. We are your church family, and if there is anything you need, prayer, or anything else, please let us know.

II Recap.

Advent has been a time for intentional, thoughtful waiting, being stretched, preparation and anticipation for the coming of The Christ. We worked through the themes reflecting on each of these as we prepared for Christmas. Focusing on; Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love in a new way to make Christmas something powerful and significant for us.

Our emphasis on justice returns us to the original meaning of the coming of The Christ. The coming of The Christ announced the promise of justice. The work of returning, reconciling, restoring, redeeming, rescuing the world to God's original intent. God has always been doing the work of redeeming all of creation back to him. The incarnation of Jesus, "*moving into our neighborhood*", is the working, with us, building the Kingdom of Heaven. Bringing heaven to earth. We roll up our sleeves and work alongside what Jesus came to do. Bringing about real justice in each one of these areas. Now we have come to the end of Advent. Christmas is just in a couple of days. We hope this journey has helped you prepare for the coming of The Christ. Today we finish with love.

III Sunday.

We need to address this. The birth of Jesus narratives talk about joy and peace. But don't talk about hope or love. **How could the birth of the savior– of the world– not mention love?**

Love is obviously mentioned all through other sections of scripture, but surprisingly not at the birth. We've talked about hope, joy, and peace. And for the final Sunday of Advent, it's the greatest of these, love. I'm going to dig into this, and try to figure out why the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, does not mention love. MAYBE, it's because something about love is bigger, more complex, than just celebrating the coming of The Christ. Maybe salvation, wholeness, healing, is more than just the warm feeling around Christmas. Prepare yourself for a Grinch moment. Growing our understanding of Christmas. Maybe the Advent work of love is more than just a remembrance, a celebration.

Questions to get us started.

Where is it easy for you to love? Where is it difficult, a challenge for you to love?

Where do you find yourself running to the end of your ability to love?

Final question.

"What needs to grow in each of us so we can fully embrace and live out the love of this season?"

First, a simple short account of the movement of love. This simple act sets the tone for us to figure out what love looks like in action.

Story of Joseph accepting Jesus.

Matthew 1:24-25 *Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.*

I don't want to over or under emphasize Joseph. He is in the birth narrative, and our nativity scenes. Joseph is an important person. But we don't know much about him. He's in the Christmas story. But after a story about them visiting the temple, Joseph disappears. However, here we see a simple but profound movement of love by Joseph. The living truth of who God is. This calls us to wrestle with the difference between 'biblical righteousness' and the 'gospel of merciful righteousness'. The scripture's overarching message of love over just obedience to The Law. Christians are having a rough time with this tension today. Choosing law over love. Joseph begins the story of Jesus showing us the superiority of love over law. Choosing presence, staying in a tough situation, when he could have chosen to bail. Accepting your situation, and movement towards being a good human within it.

Where does this kind of love and acceptance begin?

Two simple points from this short account. We're not going to dwell a whole lot on these. But just to bring them to your attention. They are a precursor to what love looks like within the Christmas story.

1. Waking up. I want to play with this phrase because I think it portrays a greater truth. We all know we regularly go through our day really not paying attention. We're in a routine, same 'ole same 'ole, just drifting through life. **How many of you have left the house wondering if you did that thing?** Did we lock the door, turn that thing off, put that thing back up? Sometimes we need to be shaken awake. This is what Joseph did. He most likely had his life planned out. Marry...Mary, have kids, run his business, just doing life. Joseph isn't a bad person. In fact, he's a really decent human. Just doing the stuff everyone else does. *"Lifting the life"*.

But first, we have to do what Joseph did. He woke up. He saw something bigger than his life.

2. Doing "exactly" what God commands us to do. In that waking up there's another thing to do. When you wake up (become aware) you will want to follow your God. When you wake up, the God guiding your life will be the one you want to follow. And, how did Joseph obey God? *"Exactly"*. This is the one I wrestle with. I may come around and do what you ask me to do. I— MAY. But I'm going to do it my way. This is a constant battle for me. And it might be for you also. But we saw Joseph following God's command to love. Doing what God commanded is at the root of love.

Move onto our primary teaching passage.

This is the passage I really want to focus on today. It's not a Christmas passage. But builds the same idea of the love displayed by Joseph. And the birth of Jesus. God taking on flesh and living among us.

What does this love look like in action?

This is a growing understanding of love as we follow the life of Jesus.

Luke 5:17-25 *One day while Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and teachers of religious law were sitting nearby. (It seemed that these men showed up from every village in all Galilee and Judea, as well as from Jerusalem.) And the Lord's healing power was strongly with Jesus. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a sleeping mat. They tried to take him inside to Jesus, but they couldn't reach him because of the crowd. So they went up to the roof and took off some tiles. Then they lowered the sick man on his mat down into the crowd, right in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Young man, your sins are forgiven." But the Pharisees and teachers of religious law said to themselves, "Who does he think he is? That's blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!"*

Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he asked them, "Why do you question this in your hearts? Is it easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up and walk'? So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!"

And immediately, as everyone watched, the man jumped up, picked up his mat, and went home praising God. Everyone was gripped with great wonder and awe, and they praised God, exclaiming, "We have seen amazing things today!"

This is what love looks like in action. The nature of the radical, real love we celebrate this time of year. A love that carries others on mats and lowers them through roofs.

So, how does this kind of love work?

1. Love includes people not like us. There are all sorts of historical theories around who these people were. You've probably heard this as a story of a man who had four friends that were so loyal, loved him so much, they carried him all the way to see Jesus. A very valid and likely interpretation. But there is also a belief this was a very wealthy man, and these were his servants who carried him. Also equally valid for that day. Obviously there is no way we can know for sure. Either way, it's a beautiful story of a bond between people who are not alike. And for whatever reason, have reached across a wide difference to show love.

In **Matthew 5:46-48** we see what Jesus taught about love in The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told people to love everyone, including their enemies. Because even people who don't know God love people who are like them. Real love is reaching across differences to love.

2. Love is shrinking of self to accommodate the other. In order to love like this, we must lessen, shrink ourselves, to make room for the other. These four men (whether friends or servants) lessened themselves to make room to accommodate this paralyzed man on the mat. Shrinking of self is what God did at creation, to make room for us to have free will.

What is a shrinking of self? There is a mystic Jewish word; **Zimzum**- "***a self-imposed contraction of self.***" Sounds fancy doesn't it? Like not even a real world. This practice is intentionally giving up a claim to space, power, control, rights, to make room for another. It's roommates dividing up their place. What co-workers do with responsibilities and spaces. What parents do when kids come. House grows to become kid-proofed, get the mini-van, vacations are different, everything has spit up on it, and more. For the four men to bring this paralyzed man to Jesus, there had to be a lessening of themselves to make room for the other. That's what real love in action looks like.

3. Love is muscular. I love this word when it comes to spiritual things. **Faith. Prayer. Hope. Joy. Peace. Love.** Both literally and physically. Two weeks ago Angela talked about feelings. Feel all your feelings. They're real. But these four; **Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love** are more powerful than feelings. Sometimes this love has to push past what 'feels' like obstacles. Things that would normally be a barrier to being able to love someone. Real love is not detoured, blocked, lessened by things that may get in the way. Things like values, beliefs, background, nationalities, religion, culture, etc. Love carries those who can't carry themselves. Love stands up for those who no one is standing up for. ***"Love is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast and is not proud. It never dishonors another, and does not seek its own way. It's not easily angered and doesn't keep score. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres"***. Sound familiar?
Real love in action is a muscular choice to, not just a feeling.

4. What NOT love is. I would be remiss if I didn't point out what 'not love' is. We saw the Pharisee's reaction to this display of love. For both the men who carried this paralyzed man, and especially how Jesus responded. 'Not love' is the opposite of what we saw 'love in action' to be. 'Not love' never includes people not like us. It only loves those like them. 'Not love' always demands to protect its space, rights, and self-interest. 'Not love' stands at a distance and judges. 'Not love' is actually weak, ineffective, because it only considers its own interests. 'Not love' measures holiness as distance from unworthy, rather than hanging out with people who are different. The Pharisees demanded obedience to keep people in line. Like Joseph; Jesus practiced love over law. 'Merciful righteous' over 'legal righteousness' And these four men saw a love in action they wanted to live out.

IV Challenge.

As we wind down Advent, and head towards Christmas we celebrate love— REAL deep "mat carrying" love. We wrap up all of this work of preparation for the coming of The Christ, with an understanding of what love actually means. It is the lead fruit of the spirit. All the other fruit depend on, and rest on, love. Love is what unites us in our differences. Love goes before, and holds everything together.

PARTICULAR VS GENERAL.

But it must be a love that moves us to the particular. We don't just love people— everyone. We love others in a way that they specifically know that we love them. We include people not like us. We do this by lessening ourselves, making room, and pushing through obstacles, barriers that block love. **We become 'mat carriers'.**

The love at Christmas calls us to carry others when they cannot make it on their own. And people will see our love in action. ***Everyone was gripped with great wonder and awe, and they praised God, exclaiming, "We have seen amazing things today!"*** Be a person who carries others on mats

Again the Advent candle reminds us that love is a light that shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome our love.

How will your simple movement of love be a light in a dark world?

Join us Wednesday night at 6:30.