

We Need Love More Than Ever

I John 3:1-6; 23-24 and 4:7-8; 19

December 8, 2019

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Good morning church and welcome back to our series of messages called “Now More Than Ever”. If you were with us last Sunday you will remember that we talked about hope and the fact that we need hope in our lives, we need hope in our world now more than ever.

Perhaps you remember that we tried to make a clear distinction between using the word hope as a verb as opposed to using the word hope as a noun. When we use it as a verb, it conveys wishful thinking that something we want to happen will, in fact, actually happen. But we really have no assurance, no confidence that it will happen.

My sister Penny and I talk about sports all the time. She is the biggest Steelers fan living in the Cleveland Metropolitan Area. Often when we talk about an upcoming game we will say, ”Well, I hope they win but I’m not sure they will given all their injuries.”

Even when someone says the word using it as a verb you can detect the lack of confidence in their voice. You can sense the wishful thinking – “I hope that will happen but I don’t know???”

But using the word hope as a noun conveys a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Last Thursday our entire family, 17 of us, gathered at our home having the hope that it was going to be a great day because some were coming from out of town, because every detail had been cared for to make sure it would be a great day assisted in no small part by the fact that their mother, mother-in-law, Nana and my wife was making the meal, had baked the pies and she is a wonderful cook. They knew what to expect and she did not disappoint. And it was a great meal, a great day and a great weekend. (Except for a visit to the ER)

So this hope that we have in Advent is more than wishful thinking in this run-up to Christmas. It is desire filled with expectation. We already know what happened. We know God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. That God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

We already know that Advent reminds us of what we know about the hope we have in Jesus. And I think that is something the world needs now more than ever. An awareness of the hope we have, the confidence we have that this is God's world. He created it. He sustains it. He has sent his son to the world to save us from sin that we might restore our relationship with God and that God wants to do life with us. He wants to do the day to day with us.

Advent helps us remember the hope we have in Jesus. We need to be reminded of that. The world needs to know that and remember that.

Today I want to focus on love. You already heard me recite John 8:16-17. How many of you know John 3:16 by heart? Great! Do you know verse 17 as well? Let's say it together.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-17

We need hope more than ever. We need love more ever. We need to be aware of the love God has for us, for all of us. This love that God has for us is so deep, so profound that God would send his only son into the world at Christmas so that we would receive it. Then God would give up his son, Jesus would lay down his life so that we would accept his love and his sacrifice for us. We and the world need to be reminded of that love now more than ever. We need, the world needs an awareness of that love.

I John 3:1 says,

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!

We are loved by God. We are not just loved. We are considered part of God's family. That means that God prays for us when he says his prayers because we're his children and we pray for our children when we pray, right? Except that maybe God doesn't pray 'cause he'd just be talking to himself. Here's the point: You are important to God. Everyone, all people are important to God.

God's love for us, his gift of Jesus to us makes it possible for us to be accepted by God. Do you know what it's like to be accepted by someone? Do you know the feeling of being rejected?

I had a good friend when I was in elementary school. Sometimes he would invite me to go to picnics and stuff with his family. He was the only boy so I was his friend who was invited and included. I loved being asked, being wanted, being included, being accepted. What an incredible feeling of acceptance. And I always had fun.

That same friend disappointed me a few years later. I attended an elementary school through 8th grade. My 8th grade homeroom teacher was new to teaching and the first male teacher I'd ever had. He was young and tall and he loved basketball. We had no gym at our school but we had a playground so we played basketball at lunchtime and after school. He taught us the game and played with us.

One night he arranged for us to play against a junior high team where he student taught. We were to meet him there. My friend's father offered to drive but they only had room for 5 kids. I was not invited to go. When I discovered there was no room for me and no one wanted to tell me, I was crushed. When I asked if I could go they said "no!". I was as good as most of the guys. It hurt to be left out. Clearly I felt rejected. Being excluded is a terrible feeling.

You probably have your own stories of being accepted and rejected. You've had your own experiences of being included and being excluded. It might still sting a bit as you recall past rejections.

As I reflected on the love and acceptance that God offers us, my thoughts turned to bullying. No matter how old you are, you may have been bullied at some point when you were in school.

One of my sons was bullied when he was in first grade. First grade! It was so bad that he cried about going to school and didn't want to go. That's when I went to the principal for help. I told him, "This is now your problem as well as mine since now he doesn't want to come to school." He agreed. He was glad I approached him. He wanted to help. He spoke to the boys, the 2 bullies and it stopped immediately. Good thing it did cause my son had 16 years of schooling ahead of him.

Bullying is a huge issue in schools, as most of you know. The National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice indicates that nationwide 1 in 5 students aged 12-18 experience bullying. That same source indicates that among students age 12-18, who reported being bullied at school, 15% were bullied online or by text messaging.

When someone is bullied, they feel picked on, singled out and isolated. They experience fear because the bullying may include threats of physical harm and/or social embarrassment.

But I have to believe and I think research supports this; that the real pain that one experiences when they are bullied is the pain of being rejected and unloved. They feel unwanted and without worth.

That's yet another reason why we need love now more than ever. We need to be reminded that we are loved, that we are counted among those who are children of God, that we are included in God's family because of what God has already done for us. Because Jesus came for us as an expression of God's love for us, we are included and accepted by God. We are, you and I are, somebodies in God's world.

So as we enter this season of Advent and prepare to celebrate Christmas, each week we are reminded of one of the realities of Christmas that has existed in the world for all believers since that night the shepherds discovered the baby Jesus in the manger.

Last week it was hope, Hope realized. We have hope. We are people of hope. We possess confident awareness that this is God's world. He created it and sustains it.

That God sent his Son to earth for us to restore and deepen his relationship with us, to forgive us for sin and to do life with us. That's the first reality.

Today we identify the second reality that God loves us so much that we are included into his family.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! I John 3:1

God watches over us and cares for us, God accepts us and includes us the way a mother or father cares for their very own children. We are his! Now we know that, right? We've got that, right?

Why then would we say that we now need love more than ever? Because we do!

You and I need to be continuously reminded that we are loved by God, that God is in our lives and God is by our side. We need that confidence. We need that assurance. We need to know that God loves us and accepts us.

Once we understand the depth of God's love for us; the sacrifice God has made on our behalf, then doesn't that lead us to appreciate God so much more and love him in return? I think it does especially when we consider Jesus dying on the cross for our sins.

And once we love God because of who God is and all that God has done for us, doesn't that make us want to do the things God asks us to do for him? Doesn't it make us want to obey God? I think it does.

Look at verses 23, 24 –

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him and he in them. I John 3:23-24

We need love now more than ever. We need to be continuously aware of God's love for us and, and we need to share God's love for the world with the world. We need to love one another.

In I John 4:7-8, John writes –

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. I John 4:7-8

We must make the connection. Do you love God? Then love other people. And a few verses later, John writes,

We love because he first loved us. I John 4:19

It has become harder and harder for us to share our faith with others. Many companies now have policies that prevent us from talking openly about our faith, of making people feel uncomfortable about their faith situation, of any attempt to share with them what we believe and why we believe it.

Organizations have become hyper sensitized to not make unbelievers uncomfortable. A few years ago, I attended a Christmas party for my wife's company. Yes, they were allowed to call it a Christmas party.

The food was great. The entertainment was a musical group from a local college who sang Christmas carols. They were very good, singing lots of songs we knew. Would you like to guess whose names were never mentioned in any of the music? Jesus, God, Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds. Even the Little Drummer Boy was not permitted. Why? Because he played his drum for him!

So we are faced with a challenge. We can moan, complain, and pout which is what we normally do. Or we can love. We can love because Jesus commands us to do so. We can love before we even know who they are, before they love us because God first loved us.

You do not know, you cannot think of a single person that God does not love, for whom God did not give his one and only Son to suffer and die for their sins, to be raised from death to life for their salvation. They may not realize it yet! They may not accept it, yet! But God did that for them nevertheless.

God loves everyone, unconditionally. We love conditionally – if we know them, like them, if we are loved by them. We need to be more like God, because we need love now more than ever!