

CALLED TO ADVENT

Called to Love

1 John 4:7-11

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When I was growing up I remember a couple of things about this time of year. I remember the snowfall, the cold temperatures, the Christmas shopping, the good cookies and.... someone in my family always getting sick. Every year at this time it seemed like either I or one of my siblings would get sick. It is so frustrating to be sick at Christmas! I'll never forget the year I had strep throat right before Christmas. Not only did I feel terrible, but I was missing the fun my family had planned.

I remember waking up with a horrible sore throat. I went downstairs and found out my mom was out shopping with some of my siblings. My dad was home with me. When I saw my dad in the kitchen I told him that my throat hurt so much, and I really needed a drink of cold water. He looked at me and said, "I think your throat would feel better if you had something warm to drink." I thought to myself, "What??? That is the dumbest thing I had ever heard. Warm water on a sore throat! Didn't my dad get that my throat was on fire? It was burning with every swallow. I wanted cold water, not warm!!!" My dad didn't have a clue of what I wanted to soothe my throat. As my thoughts were going on in my head, he was heating up some water for tea. He put honey in the tea and asked me to try it. Grudgingly I tried it.... hold that for now.

Today we are in the 4th week of Advent and the candle we light is the candle of love. We celebrate that in the birth of Jesus we come to know just how much God loves us. And what makes this gift even more precious is that the world didn't even know that we needed the gift. We didn't know we needed a Savior. We didn't know just how desperately we needed God's love revealed in Jesus to bring us hope, joy and peace. Our reading today is from the book of 1 John 4:7-11 from the Message translation. In it, we'll learn more about this amazing love of God.

⁷⁻¹⁰ *My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves*

is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love — so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about — not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God. ¹¹ *My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other.*

Jesus is the gift of Christmas, the gift that reveals God's love for the world. But why do we even need the gift? Why do we need Jesus to know God's love?

To answer that question we need to go all the way back to the creation story in Genesis. That story says that in the beginning, when the world was created, God created us good. God created us to be in relationship with God and each other. The relationship was all about love and trust. Until... trust was broken. Adam and Eve broke the relationship. They did the very thing God told them not to do. They ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And do you remember what happened next in the story? Adam and Eve hid from God and from one another. Fear and shame — the result of a broken relationship.

As we've said before, the story of Adam and Eve is our story. It's the story of every person. It happened long ago and it has never stopped; it continues to happen here and now. We all break trust with God and with one another. We all live in shame and fear. And it destroys our relationships. It's the root cause of all that's wrong in our lives and in this world.

So, what do we do? We try to fix our own brokenness with God. We try to earn God's love by saying the right words, coming to church, giving an offering, being "good" people who do good deeds. But that never works. We get frustrated because it never seems to be enough. We know the truth about ourselves. And we know that God knows the truth about us, too, and so we continue to live in fear and shame. We continue to live as broken people in a broken world. We are hopeless and helpless.

And into that mess comes Jesus. God's love in flesh. Not because we deserve it. Not because we've earned

it. Not even because we asked for it. But because God knows what we need. We need a Savior whose love will dispel our fear and whose unconditional forgiveness will remove our shame. That's why the gift of Jesus is so precious. It's a gift that reminds us that God loves us no matter what. We need to know that God's love isn't dependent on what we say or do.

God's love does not depend on our initiative or on our worthiness. We don't have to reach out to God or even believe in God in order to be loved. We don't have to clean up our act before God can love us. We don't have to measure up to some standard in order to be lovable. No, God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not. God's love is yours, to keep, forever.

And not only that, but God fills us with this amazing love so that we can share it with others. On our own our hearts are weak and limited. On our own we can't love others as we want to. But that's why we need Jesus. Jesus fills our hearts to overflowing with love, even for those people we find it really hard to love. You see, we are called to open ourselves to God's love so that God can love others through us. When we love one another, we represent God to the world. By allowing the love that God has showered on us to overflow onto our sisters and brothers, we make God's love real and visible in the ordinary lives of ordinary people. God gives us Jesus to live in us, so that through us Jesus can continue to welcome outcasts and touch untouchables and heal the broken. When God's unimaginable, limitless love comes alive in us, we become the real presence of God in the world. All we can possibly say to such love is thank you, and may it indeed be so.

And this love of God lived through us can have no boundaries, because God's love knows no boundaries. Jesus ignored the limits that religious communities imposed. He ate and talked with people whom the religious leaders had rejected as heretics, as sinful, as filthy and despicable. He touched people who were considered untouchable and welcomed people whom everyone else had kicked out. His harshest words were reserved not for the impure, but for unloving, self-righteous people who saw some of God's children as beneath their attention and certainly as unworthy of their love. If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others can extend: to every single human being.

That Christmas when I was sick my dad didn't give me what I wanted. He gave me what I needed. I had no idea what I really needed, but he did. And he gave it freely

and lovingly. He gave me a drink of warm tea. And it was amazing. It was so soothing on my throat, it took away the pain so that I could swallow.

God has sent Jesus at Christmas. And in so doing God gave us all what we needed – to know that we are totally and completely loved. There is no one, not one, who is outside of the love of God through Jesus. We all need this love and we can't help but go out and share this amazing love with others.

Does God's love change you? Does it affect your behavior? Does it affect the way you treat people? The love of God through Jesus changes us into loving compassionate people who care for the needs of those who around us. God wants to love the world – through you and me. How will you share this amazing love today?

I invite you to open your hands on your laps and close your eyes. Then I'll pray for you to receive, to really believe, the promise of God's love in Jesus. Then I invite you to put your hands over your hearts and pray that Jesus would fill your hearts with love so that you can love others.