

**ADVENT WEEK 4**  
**Rediscover Christmas**

## **Finding LOVE in our DISAGREEMENTS**

Wow, these are divided times. This has been a year of divisions and disagreements. There have been huge, angry, sometimes violent displays of our disagreements. There are divisions over politics, racism, justice, elections, divisions over in-person and on-line school, divisions about the pandemic, whether to wear a mask or not, whether to get vaccinated or not, whether to impose emergency measures or not, even whether to stock up on toilet paper or not.

It seems our culture, our nation, our world, even in our community the ways to divide us have multiplied. The struggles between “us-s” and the “thems” have taken hold in almost every aspect of our lives.

This is by no means an excuse, but throughout history, our world has been filled with wars and oppression. There have always been the weak verses the powerful, the haves verses the have-nots.

In addition to all this year’s disagreements, Christmas has rolled around again this year. Christmas always brings disagreements about how to celebrate the holiday: open presents Christmas Eve or have to wait until Christmas morning? Is Christmas dinner turkey, ham, or beef? Parents have different views on whether or not to emphasize the man in the big red suit. And fruit cake? or not? (No, that’s not a disagreement because nobody likes fruit cake!)

You know, there has been too much “us” versus “them” all the way through human history. It goes back to the very beginning.

That’s why this Sunday’s message stands in such a contrast. Today, we look at the final candle of the Advent wreath and hear that it is God’s love that is the driving force behind the birth of Jesus. God loves us so much, that He sent His own Son to suffer and die in our place. This is what Christmas is about. Jesus’ birth in a poor and rough manger shows us clearly that it is definitely true that God *IS* love.

Back in the earliest recorded history, we find that God has a story of love for us. In Genesis, we read a story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God created the earth, the sun, the moon, the animals and a place to live. He did this all for the sake of one man and one woman. Adam and Eve.

Picture this... a lush green landscape filled with every kind of fruit tree known. Ripe harvests of fresh fruits and vegetables are ready on the vine, in the trees and on the ground. Colorful flowers fill the area with roses, tulips and other assorted colors and smells. A gentle brook flows through the area in peaceful harmony with the surrounding beauty. Paradise is what Adam and Eve were brought into. They were also greeted with the immediate presence of God in their midst. They were able to talk directly with and to God. They knew their maker in a way we can only imagine.

With all these blessings, they chose not to love God back, not to thank God, not to follow in His ways. Adam and Eve both chose their own path, the path of going their own way in rebellion, the path of sin and separation from God.

But God *IS* love, and in His infinite love for us, God set out on a new path of His own. Immediately God promised a Savior to come who would overcome sin and the separation from God, and defeat the devil and death.

This is how John, in today's New Testament reading, described God's love for you and me: ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*** God's love for you, not deserved, not earned, is the reason Christmas "is." It is NOT that we loved God. In your sin, by yourself, without the Holy Spirit working in you, you can't love God. Without God's intervention, you are simply headed towards a horrible forever in hell. That's what sin is – it is a broken relationship with God that you can't fix. Sin is a permanent "us" verses "them." But here's the wonderful, amazing, loving truth: In the face of this awful disagreement, John says: ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world.*** And He was born at Christmastime. He entered our world, our humanity, in order to save people like us!

Jesus came to live a sinless life, to perfectly follow God's way. Because everyone of us are born from sinful parents, we inherited sin, and we act it out. You know the disagreements you have with God and with others. You don't want to love God or others as much as you love yourself, now do you?

But Jesus came, He was born a real human baby from Mary, and He sinlessly loved God and others. He is the only innocent human -ever.

Even though He alone is innocent, He came to suffer as the guiltiest of us all. He came to take onto Himself all sin, and selfishness, and hatred, and hurt that has ever been in this world. And He suffered, paying for it all by His death on the cross. Winning for you forgiveness, and heaven, a new life freed from the doom of the hell you deserve and instead living in hope from the heaven that is waiting for you as His certain gift.

***"This is love"*** John said, ***"... he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."***

And this love of God, ***CHANGES*** you on the inside. It must. God's love is so strong and powerful, it changes your thinking and your emotions, and your actions. God's love affects you so you love Him back, and you love others. You get rid of the disagreements. You stop the "us" verses "them." John puts it this way: ***Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.***

Love is a difficult thing for sinful people like us to grasp. John tried to explain God's love for us in his letter. John knew Jesus personally. He was there to experience first-hand the love of our Savior. John knew that loving other people is not an option for a follower of Jesus. Love is ESSENTIAL. He said: ***"...if we love one another, God lives in us..."*** 1 John 4:12 But, ***"if someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"*** 1 John 4:20

He is saying that your love for other people is a small version of the huge, amazing, incomprehensible love that God has for you. If you believe in Jesus Christ, this love for others should happen spontaneously from your heart. Just to make sure, however, John also gives you a clear directive, a command from God Himself, that we are to love all of our fellow men, not just our family and friends who you like. But you are to love co-workers you might not like. Your boss, strangers on the street, even people who won't ever like you, people who not only disagree with you, but they want to be constantly disagreeable. God sacrificed so much for you, that this is a small price to pay as a tribute of thanks. Jesus Himself said in today's Gospel reading: ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...."*** Matthew 5: 43-44

This kind of love for other people is difficult for sinful people like us to comprehend. We are naturally vengeful and hold grudges. We are apt to hurt those closest to us as well as

strangers. But, the story of Christmas is one of conscious, dedicated sacrifice and love. Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for the mistakes of others. We know the story and the impact of Christmas. But, what about people who haven't experienced this powerful, self-sacrificing love? For them, most likely, it's not your words, but your actions of love that impact them the strongest. It is more important for you to demonstrate the love of Jesus and be an example for others to see and experience that love.

Ernest Gordon's book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, is a story based on true World War II events. It's a story about Scottish soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors, to labor on a jungle railroad. The captured Scottish soldiers, however, had degenerated to treating each other with brutish, savage behavior. One afternoon, however, something happened.

A shovel was missing. The Japanese officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot... It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the Scottish POW to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, when they counted the shovels, no shovel was missing. You see, there had been a miscount at the first checkpoint.

The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others!... The incident had a profound effect... The captured men began to treat each other like brothers.

Finally when the Allies swept in and liberated that POW camp, the surviving Scottish soldiers were nothing but human skeletons. They had been abused so badly. These POWs lined up in front of their Japanese captors... and instead of attacking them, they protected them. The Scottish soldiers insisted: "no more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness."

The sacrifice of that one man who laid down his life to save all the other captured soldiers, changed the hearts of every fellow man, every victim in that camp. He knew that he was innocent, yet he chose to take the blame just the same. He faced the punishment to save the others. I hope you never have to face that kind of awful situation. Still, everyday you can still impact those around you by your loving actions.

***"This is love" John wrote for us today, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."***

Let me share another story of how love can change those around you.

There is a story told of an old monastery that had fallen on hard times. It was once a great order, but as a result of waves of persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others. What's more is that all five of these monks were over seventy years old. Clearly it was a dying order. Things looked grim.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a fellow priest from a nearby town occasionally used for prayer. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to go visit the priest and ask him if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The priest welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the priest could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "It is the

same in my town. Almost no-one comes to the church anymore.” So the old abbot and the old priest wept together. They talked for a short while and then the time came when the abbot had to leave. The abbot said, “It has been wonderful that we should meet after all these years, but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

“No, I am sorry,” the priest responded. I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Savior is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well, what did the priest say?”

He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Bible together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – It was something cryptic – was that the Savior is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks thought about these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the priest’s words. The Savior is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Father Abbot? He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Definitely he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets so grumpy at times. But, come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it Eldred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the priest did mean Brother Eldred.

But there’s no way he meant Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Savior.

Of course, the priest didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just so ordinary. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that important for God’s purposes, could I?

As they each contemplated in this way, the old monks began to treat one another with extraordinary love and respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Savior. And on the chance that each monk himself might be the Savior, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary love and respect

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its grounds, to wander among some of its paths, or even now and then to go into the dilapidated buildings to meditate. As people did this, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary love and respect that now began to surround the five monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. Its beauty drew them in. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the priest’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

The church can be an amazing place when it is working as its supposed to – when we are treating one another as if each person were Christ himself. When we are following the command Jesus left – ***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”*** Or as John wrote: ***“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”***

Love shouldn't be strange or unusual for us. If you know and trust in Jesus, God's gift of love for you, then your love should be an infection – that is, a GOOD infection. Here, at this place, St. Paul Lutheran Church of Amherst, we should exude an environment of love. Through caring for one another, we can spread the love of Christ and create a nurturing climate.

Through these two stories, we can see that actions of love can change people around you. Our actions often speak louder than words. Our community, the neighbors around us, should be impacted by God's love through us. Whether we realize it or not, the world is paying attention.

In this time where disagreements are all over and dividing people apart, as Christians, we can practically show love by just listening to what people actually have to say, and by taking time out of our busy lives to try to make a difference.

Just as the man in the shovel story sacrificed himself for total strangers, can you be willing to lend a hand when a stranger needs assistance? Can you pray each day for God to open your eyes to see opportunities to love other people in practical ways?

***“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*** That's what Christmas is about. God loved you so much that He sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem's manger for you. And now, ***“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”***

Merry Christmas. Amen.