

**“Love”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, December 15, 2013**

As we find ourselves in this third Sunday of Advent, and we clearly have a theme of love that is throughout our service today, we recognize that love is also the theme widely spread in our culture. Love at Christmas time is everywhere. The love that we see out there in the world, in the malls and around town, is mostly a sentimental love. It is the kind of love that can easily be placed into a Hallmark gift card. It is the kind of love that takes shape in gift giving and gift receiving during this time of year. It is also the season for the Santa Claus type of love which is a kind of love which is generous in its expression, but it is a kind of love that is based upon a naughty or nice list. Santa Claus’ expression of love is not really of the unconditional kind. It is conditional. It is, be good and you will get a bunch of stuff; be bad and you will get coal in your stockings. I am anxious to see what will be in our house on Christmas morning.

With the birth of Jesus, we get a different kind of love. We get a love incarnate. We get a love divine. This is a love that comes from God. We get God’s love that is revealed in human form. We get what is called a biblical love.

Now, in our culture, we use the word “love” for everything. We use it all the time. In my life, I love my dog, and I love pizza, and I love my wife and I love my kids, and I hope you know that I love my dog and my family very differently, but we use this word “love” for everything, but the love that comes down at Christmas is different. I want to explore this morning what it means that, in Jesus, we experience biblical love. There is probably a whole variety of different levels of biblical love, but I want to focus today on three in particular.

Biblical love is first understood in the concept of covenant. Covenantal love sort of saturates the biblical narrative. Covenantal love is understood as a mutual commitment of trust, of regard and obedience between two partners.

Covenantal love is trust and regard and obedience between two players, and in biblical Hebrew language, we use the word “hassad” which means steadfast love. This is a love that includes a reciprocity inside the established relationship, so there is this established relationship between God’s people and God, and within this relationship, there is a give and take. There are expectations, and there is response that goes back and forth. Covenantal love is also sort of public. It refers to a solemn public commitment of fidelity that covenant partners make to each other. This is sort of what happens in a marriage ceremony. It is a proclamation about the love that we are going to enter into and the expectations of that love, so in the Old Testament, God chooses Israel as a covenant partner and vows in this relationship to protect Israel. God says I will be your God and you will be my people, and I will protect you because you need protection because what is coming your way is dangerous. Life is a struggle. Life is painful, and in this relationship I will be there for you. So, Israel, in this covenantal love, is called to listen to God, to love God—that is, to respond to God in a loving manner. It is also to obey God and to recite God’s Torah. For Israel, the Torah is always so central, God’s law, and they must talk about it, say it out loud, remind each other what it means to be a Jew. You follow the Torah in this covenantal relationship of love, so biblical love is covenantal.

Biblical love, secondly, is neighborly. Neighborly love is part of this relationship with God. Of course, it is articulated most clearly in Leviticus in the 19th Chapter where it says “You shall love the life of your neighbor as you love your own life. I am your God”. This is the instruction to the people of Israel, the Israelites, and it is about a public obligation. Neighborly love, loving of the neighbor is part of this relationship with God. If you love God, you love your neighbor. This neighborly love is really sort of out there because what God says in the Torah is, this love, this neighborly love will not just be the neighbor with whom you go golfing on

Saturdays. That's not too difficult, but this love will extend to strangers and widows, orphans and aliens, which means immigrants, and so this neighborly love gets us out of our comfort zone, and it is really the central question in many ways of the Gospels. In Luke, the question is "Who is my neighbor?" when they talk about the Good Samaritan. That parable hinges on the question "Who is my neighbor?", and it is revealed that it is the despised Samaritan who is my neighbor. So, biblical love that comes to us in Christ includes covenant, includes neighbor, broadly defined.

Thirdly, and perhaps in some ways most importantly, is that biblical love, the love between God and God's people is about passion. Passionate love is part of this relationship. What Old Testament scholars point out is that, when you get to this point in the love relationship, it gets sort of rated "PG". It is emotional love. It is even somewhat erotic love, expressed between God and God's people or between Christ and Christ's church. This is where it gets hot.

If you have ever read the most, sort of, passionate scripture in the Bible along these lines of love, you read the Song of Solomon. In the Old Testament, this Book is an erotic love poem and it is cast in the framework of a man and a woman writing love poetry to each other but, of course, it is really about the relationship between God and Israel or between Christ and the church, but listen to a few verses of this passionate love story between God and God's people. Use your imagination, but don't let it go too far.

This is a woman, having a dream about her lover. This is Israel having a dream about her God: "I slept but my heart was awake. Listen. My beloved is knocking at the door. Open to me (says my beloved from outside the door). Open to me my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night". This loving partner is outside in the rain and the cold wanting to get in, but this woman in the poem says "But I have put off my garment. I have taken off my clothes for the night. How could I put it on again? I have bathed my feet. How could I soil them? My beloved thrust his hand into the opening and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh upon the handles of both". This is about entrance into a doorway or something. "I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him but did not find him. I called him but he gave no answer. I adjure you, oh daughters of Jerusalem". This lover is now speaking to her other women friends. "If you find my beloved, tell him this. I am faint with love."

The power of this example of our love with God is in its passion, that we can be in a passionate relationship with God, this love that comes to us biblically, this love that comes to us through Jesus. It is like a romance, like a romantic relationship that includes passion and all kinds of emotions. That is the love that comes to us in Jesus. This is the love. You think about Jesus and his life and his Gospel stories of what he did and what he taught, and Jesus, if you read closely, is filled with passion—filled with passion for people, filled with passion for his disciples, oftentimes frustrated and angry with his disciples. This is all part of the love and emotion when we care for someone. Sometimes they "tick us off", but that's part of love. That's why they say, never go to bed angry. You've got to work it out before you fall asleep, but this is biblical love. It is covenantal. It is a relationship with obligations. It requires fidelity and faithfulness. It is neighborly. It requires a response to our neighbor, and it is passionate. It is filled with emotion. It is not just any kind of emotion, but it is emotion tied up with expectations of our partner, of struggles with our partner, of disappointments and angers with our partner, and forgiveness of our partner. This is the relationship that is open to us and available to us with God. It includes the whole range of human emotions, and this God is invested in us, invested in how we live, invested in what we do as faithful people.

So, Christmas, as a religious holiday, is really not so much about sentimental love. It is not so much about gift giving and peaceful thoughts and family around the tree, although those are very nice traditions of our Christmas season. Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is really about the "nitty gritty" relationship between God and God's people. It is a "nitty gritty" relationship that is made concrete in the birth of Jesus because, what God communicates through Jesus is that this is what love will look like. This is the love that I am calling you to. This is how we are going to redeem our individual lives and save the world at the same time through the love of

Christ, and it is a love that comes to us, and it is a love that we then share with the world, so in Christ came God's love. It is not really love of sentimental and feel good emotion, but it is a love that calls us to a way of living that demands attention, allegiance, and a whole lot of passion, so it is with great joy, and a little bit of fear and trembling, that we give thanks to God this Christmas season for the love that, indeed, came down at Christmas in the form of the Christ child, and we give thanks to God for that love as it envelops us and challenges us to be God's children. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Tom Warren, Pastor