

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Christmas Love*

SERIES: *Advent 2021*

SCRIPTURES: *John 3:16; 1 John 4*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Bible Project Advent WORD Series; John Ortberg sermon*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church this morning.

Today is Christmas Sunday. For the past several weeks we have been looking in detail at the key words of the Advent Season (**TITLE SLIDE**). Hope, Peace, Joy...and how each of these words finds it's fulfillment in Jesus. This morning we will take a look at one final advent theme...LOVE.

You may wonder why we left love for the final Sunday of Advent, because the advent themes don't have a specific order. Different traditions will light the candles in different orders. And so, in one sense love is last in the series, simply because I wanted it to be and I'm the preacher and you're not and I get to decide and there's nothing you can do about it. (Haha 😊)

But another reason love comes at the end, is because "we were saving the best for last." Jesus said, that the greatest command is to "**Love God and love others.**" The Apostle Paul wrote "**these three remain, faith, hope and love...and the greatest of these is love.**"

And I believe there is a sense in all of us that love is really what life is all about.

- When a firefighter chooses to walk into a burning building to save someone he does not even know...

- When a teacher at a low-income inner city school, chooses to passionately do her job while others have walked away for more prestigious opportunities...
- If you've gone to a wedding, and a young couple stands in front of their friends and family, staring nervously into each other's eyes and awkwardly repeat their wedding vows to one another...you catch a glimpse of the stuff life is really about.
- When parents hold their new born baby for the very first time. That's love.
- When an elderly woman faithfully cares for her ailing husband year after year, as his physical body deteriorates and his mind fails, and she stays by his side...You stand back and admire and you know somehow she got it right about life. That's love.

These examples are all around us, aren't they? They are the reminders that what matters most in life is love. And so that is the advent theme we want to focus on this morning. Because more than anything else, Christmas is when God chose to give one of the greatest expressions of his love for you and me.

I. Understanding Love

Our key Scripture for today is a verse you all familiar with, that you memorized from the time you were little. It can be over-used, misunderstood at times, but the essence of the verse is the essence of our faith, and the reason for Christmas.

Would you say this verse with me?

John 3:16 – For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

That is the heart of the Christmas story. God so loved, that He took on flesh as a baby in a manger, in a little town called Bethlehem. Let's talk about this advent love.

In the ancient Greek language, there are several words for love (**eros, philia, storge**). But what's fascinating is that in the New Testament there is a very specific Greek word that the writers use when talking about Christian love. You've probably heard of this word, the primary word is **agape**.

Some scholars suggest, that it seems that agape was rarely used in classical Greek literature. In other words, in many classic Greek texts, outside of the Bible, we find those other Greek words for love but we rarely find the word agape. But agape appears all over the New Testament. It's the kind of love that Paul defines in 1 Corinthians 13. The love chapter. It's the word Jesus used, when describing the greatest commandment. It's the word John used in John 3:16 when he says, "God so loved the world..." It's almost like the writers of the New Testament were saying we need a new way to define the kind of love we see in Jesus. And that word is agape.

And so, agape is defined then, not by looking it up in an ancient Greek dictionary, but by looking at Jesus!

If you want to know what advent love is all about, look at Jesus.

Sadly we have a severe misunderstanding of love. Often when people today think of love they think of soft, mushy lovey-dovey wishy washy love. And that's because in our world love is most often understood to be a feeling. And I'll just say, the feeling isn't bad. It's not wrong. It's just not complete.

Our language doesn't help us either. We'll say we love our family but we also love hot chocolate with whipped cream and Penn State Nittany Lions and we love presents at Christmas. And if the word love means the same thing in all of those cases, your family may not feel quite as special any more.

We talk about "falling in love" and "falling out of love." As if it is something that happens to us and we are kind of "innocent by-standers."

So how do we define this agape love, exemplified by Jesus? And we've been closely following the **Bible Project** through our series, by the way today we are making available the list of videos for 2022 Bible Project study. You can pick them up as you leave.

But here is the definition they use for agape love: **a choice you make...to seek the well-being of people other than yourself...without expecting anything in return....including your enemies.**

Let me read that for you one more time. There's a lot to unpack with that definition. So let's break this down a little bit and try to understand the different parts of this definition.

And, by the way, if you don't like this definition of love...blame Jesus. Remember agape love is defined by looking at Jesus.

A. Love is a choice

The love that defines followers of Jesus is not simply an emotion or feeling that comes and goes. Agape love is an act of your will.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest command in Scripture was, he said to "love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength." He was saying, you make a choice to love God. At the core of your being is a will, a decision-making center.

We don't just hope that we are able to fall in love with God. We are making a conscious choice to do this.

Or for example, as we'll see in a minute. Jesus commands his followers to "love your enemies." It's not because all of a sudden you have positive emotional feelings

towards people you dislike. It's because for Jesus, love is a choice you make. You can choose to love your enemies, even if you don't feel like it.

Agape love then is intentional NOT instinctual. It's not something that just happens to us, rather we can choose it. It is not simply a feeling. It does not just come and go...it is an act of the will. It unites both emotions and reason.

Second, agape love means...

B. Seeking the well-being of others.

Love is "others-centered" or we might use the word selfless.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest command is...he said Love God, but then he immediately followed it up with...and love your neighbor.

So which is it? Love God or love your neighbor? The answer is yes! To ask the question is to misunderstand the meaning of agape love, because agape love is by definition others'-centered.

To love God is to love neighbor.

1 John 4:20-21 - ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

In fact, Jesus when he was explaining this concept one time, he went on to tell a story about what neighborly love looks like. He said, imagine a Jew walking a dangerous road and he is attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Several folks pass by, one being a Samaritan. The Samaritan, loads the

injured man onto his donkey, takes him to a home to be treated and cared for and pays all of the expenses for the stay. And then Jesus says, who was the neighbor? Who exemplified agape love?

It was the one who sought the well-being of the beaten Jew. Dallas Willard describes this aspect of agape love like this,

“Every contact with another human being should be one of good-will and respect, with a readiness to acknowledge, make way for, or assist the other in suitable ways.” (Renovation of the Heart)

What I love about Willard's definition is that it's so down to earth. He says when you live with agape love you are constantly aware of how your actions, even in the smallest ways are impacting the people around you. And you should be thinking about others as you go about your day. I'll give you one example of this...

Did you ever go to put a grocery cart away (**PIC of Grocery cart return**) in one of those cart returns they have out in the parking lot? I was thinking about this the other day, when I was out doing some Christmas shopping. And when I went to put my grocery cart away, and the carts are always a mess aren't they? And in one sense, we might think, it's no big deal, there just grocery carts and someone gets paid to walk around and organize them. And so I just threw my cart in there with all the other mangled carts, thinking, “Boy I'm glad, I don't have to clean up that mess.” And you see, in that moment, I failed to live by agape love. I was thinking mostly about me, my convenience and my schedule and how I have important things to do, and it's not my job anyway. That's called self-centered, not selfless.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought, I bet Jesus would have fixed the grocery carts. He would have thought about how he might be able to help the other. The opportunities to be selfless are all around us aren't they. Giving up the best

parking spot to someone else, it's leaving the last slice of pie for someone else, it's hanging up the clothes in the clothing store, back where they belong.

Love for God is so often expressed by seeking the well-being of others.

And this kind of leads us to the third aspect of agape love.

C. Love is sacrificial

Remember our definition earlier...**“Without expecting anything in return.”** Agape love will often cost you something. Time, resources, energy...that you won't get back.

Jesus said, in Luke 6 - **³⁴if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.**

Jesus often helped those who couldn't return the favor. He healed lepers, the blind the mute, paralyzed...he stood up for adulterous women and tax collectors. He fed the hungry. On the night before his crucifixion he knelt before his followers as a servant and cleaned the grunge between their toes.

I was kind of thinking that so many of us get stingy with our love, don't we? We like to put stipulations around it. Most of us keep a scorecard with our love. If you do this...then I'll love you?

It happens in marriages, in families, with co-workers, neighbors...we want to make sure the other person has earned it or they'll be able to pay us back.

I was thinking about how this happens in my own life. Recently I was going through some of my clothes, and sorting through giving some to the clothes closet. I thought, “man I'm really generous to give clothes to the clothes closet like this.” And then one

of my kids walked in and said, “So you’re giving all of your old clothes, that aren’t good enough anymore away, huh dad?” And I thought about that for a moment. What I noticed is that I always kept the best for myself and gave away the left-overs. Then I won’t have to sacrifice too much. I do it with my clothes, and my time and my money...

And I began to think about, if God loved me that way. What if he just gave me his old left-overs?

But God does not love me in that manner, because agape love is not about your left-overs, its about giving the best of what you have.

At Christmas, God didn’t give you his left-overs, he gave you the best of what He had, his own son...knowing we would never be able to repay him.

Love is sacrificial. At Christmas Jesus gave up his throne in heaven to enter an animal feeding trough. He gave up the garments of a king to be wrapped in “swaddling cloths”. It eventually led to Easter where he gave up life itself because he loved you...

1 John 4:9 - ⁹ 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.

For God so loved the world that he gave his very best...his son...

Finally, agape love...means...

D. Including our enemies...

This is perhaps where the Christian expression of love is most unique. The idea of sacrificing for the benefit of our friends or family or those that we deem “worthy”,

while costly, still may seem appropriate to most of us. But the agape love as emulated by Jesus says we are to do the same for our enemies.

“Jesus said that the ultimate standard of authentic agape love, is how well you treat the person that you can’t stand. This type of enemy-embracing love imitates the very character of God.” (BIBLE PROJECT)

Jesus said in his own sermon, **“You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy but I say to you love your enemies...**

And what I find so amazing about Jesus statement is not so much that he said, but that he then lived it.

When the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities, came to arrest him and drag him away. When they flogged him and spit on him and humiliated him. When they nailed him to a cross and stuck a sword in his side. At any moment along the way, Jesus could have turned the tables. He could have called down legions of Angels. But he did not, because deep in his heart he loved every single one of those soldiers and religious leaders. Even while they mocked him, he loved them and wanted the absolute best for their lives. And so instead, he said, “Father, please forgive them...so that one day they too, might be with us in eternity, in the great banquet hall.”

E. Jesus and Love

And that is why, in the same way that Jesus was the fulfillment of hope, joy and peace at Christmas...he was also the fulfillment of agape love.

Jesus, did not just think agape love was a neat idea. He did not just talk about and teach this kind of love. He did not just command his followers to do agape love...no,

no, the reason Jesus agape love was so transformational to our world is because Jesus lived out this kind of love. He actually did it.

Jesus chose to enter our world as a baby in a manger. He did not have to do this, it was not forced upon him...it was an act of His will. **(CHOICE)**

And it was based on his love for you (**seeking well-being of others**). And his whole life then became a living sacrifice (**WITHOUT EXPECTING RETURN**) serving the people around him in tangible ways. Feeding the hungry. Washing Feet. Without expecting anything back. He consistently moved toward poor people who couldn't benefit him or pay him in return.

And instead of attacking his enemies (**EVEN ENEMIES**) in order to overcome them...he allowed them to attack him.

What does love look like? God, becoming a baby, to be with us, knowing we would reject him and nail him to a cross....because God is love.

If you want to know what advent love looks like look at Jesus.

Ok, so now that we have a picture in our minds of agape love, let's talk about how we can be agents of love.

II. Agents of Love

Jesus gave his followers the following instructions in [John 13:34-35](#) - ³⁴ **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.**

The unique agape love, emulated by Jesus, becomes the defining characteristic of those who choose to follow Jesus...you and me.

Now one of the concepts that we've been emphasizing this morning is that love is an act of the will. You can choose it. And you might be wondering, how do I just choose to love people? Isn't that kind of fake or superficial?

There is a concept here that is really important... **"feelings follow actions."** If you are finding it difficult to love someone...a spouse, a child, a co-worker, a social media adversary, a political opponent, a group of people...one of the ways you can begin to change that is, by "doing good things for that person."

Intentionally change your thoughts about that person when they come into your mind. Don't dwell on the ways they frustrate you and how you're going to get them back. You know how we can linger on those kinds of thoughts. Choose to start thinking about that person the way God thinks about them. And then start acting in loving ways towards them.

Feelings eventually follow actions.

What are some actions, we can choose to practice agape love? There's a great book that we use here at Five Forks in some of our pre-marriage counseling and that we actually did a sermon series on a few years ago...called "The Five Love Languages." I sometimes think, that once every year, we should all review and walk through the love languages. But the basic concept is that, there are five primary ways we can choose to express love for others. They are simple and practical, but about the best way to be agents of love. We don't have time to go over all of them this morning. Let me just highlight three of them for us...first,

A. Use your words

One of the primary ways that express love is the words that we speak.

Proverbs 18:21 – The tongue has the power of life and death...

One of the great sadness's in our world today is the critical nature of our words. "You'll never be good enough." "Why do you always behave like that?" "I can't stand you." "Why can't you get it right?" We are so quick to speak harshly, to condemn, to call out and shout out all of the mistakes, failures and sins of others. But for whatever reason we are just not good at saying "encouraging words".

"I love you." "I'm so proud of you." "Thank you for your hard work." "You are so smart."

There is someone in your world, who needs to hear words of love spoken to them. This Christmas I would like to encourage you to make an intentional effort to change the tone and content of our words. Speak out loud your love for the people around you.

Second,

B. Physical Touch

Physical touch has taken a hard hit in our world. All too often the physical touch that we hear about in our world is abusive. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, inappropriate touching. And it is wrong. It is never ok. There are never excuses for physical abuse of any kind.

At the same time, we were created for good, healthy physical touch.

Numerous research projects in the area of child development have reached the conclusion that physical touch is a way of communicating love. Babies who are held, hugged, and kissed develop a healthier emotional life than those who are left for long periods of time without physical contact.

And too many people in our world using the excuse, “I’m not a touchy-feely person.” Too bad. It’s one the primary ways we express love...and Jesus was the master at loving people through the gift of his touch.

There’s a little phrase that is often associate with Jesus throughout gospel’s, when Jesus came upon broken, hurting, sick people...do you know what it is?

And he reached out and touched them...

A 12 year old girl is deathly ill, Jesus touches her. Two blind men in Capernaum. Jesus touches them. A deaf mute in the Decapolis. A blind man in Bethsaida. A leper, who had probably gone months, even years without feeling the touch of another human being...can you imagine the moment, Jesus reached out and touched him. Over and over he loves people by physical touch.

There are people in your life, in our world, who need loved with appropriate hugs, handshakes, pat on the back.

Third...

C. Gift-giving

It’s appropriate to talk about this, on Christmas Sunday as we anticipate and look forward to opening gifts on Christmas morning.

And I’ll just say, this is a concept that has taken a hard hit in the Christian world recently.

There are many of us who get caught up in the glitz and glamour of the Christmas season. And the story of Jesus coming as a baby, get’s lost in wrapping paper, lights and family gatherings. When materialism takes over our Christmas, it’s wrong.

At the same I've also noticed that on the other end of the spectrum we Christians can be awful stingy when it comes to gifts. Gift giving for some is too frivolous, childish, worldly and so we avoid giving gifts altogether. That too is not a biblical approach.

Remember where we started this morning. For God so loved the world...that he gave.

In Love God gave...God is the best gift-giver ever. Gifts are one of the best expressions of agape love. May the gifts, that you give and receive this week, be a reminder, a glimpse of agape love.

And folks truly that's what Christmas is about. The baby in the manger was God's gift, his expression of his love for you.

Benediction:

1 John 4:7-9 - ⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ 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.

Please join us this Friday afternoon/evening for one of our Christmas Eve services. We'll be singing some songs, sharing communion, candle-lighting and we'll spend a few minutes reflecting on Emmanuel...God with us!

Don't forget you Bible Project brochure on your way out!