

Advent 4
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
John 3.1-21
Titus 2.11-14
December 18, 2022

We are nearly at the end of our Advent journey. Or, at least, of the celebration of the Advent season. The lessons of waiting and the reminder of God-with-us and salvation as liberation will continue even beyond Christmas, even beyond Epiphany. In these weeks we have learned about waiting with hope, keeping awake and being aware of social injustices. We have sought the peace of God, which does not look like the concept of peace humans define. We have discussed how the joy we experience in this time and throughout life are intermingled with the sorrows of the world.

The fourth Sunday of Advent leads us to love. As I prepared this sermon I was telling Rob that creating sermons about love are simultaneously so easy, because everyone can agree to love – but it is also so difficult. Anything we say about love can seem so generic, vague, non-descript. Everyone agrees love is important in the world, and there are plenty of songs and poems and stories about love. We want to be loved. Yet, it is difficult to talk about because we all interpret love differently, and there are many ways of giving and experiencing love.

I recently began reading bell hooks' book "all about love." She discusses at some length how difficult it is for everyone to agree upon a definition of love in our world. She suggests that love is made up of other ingredients: "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication."¹ This definition reminds us that love is more complicated than we imagine, and that it is something we often have to work at and be intentional about. If love was so simple, we would all be more loving all the time, and I'd assume we would have less war and violence and suffering in our world. If it weren't so complicated we wouldn't need to talk about it and be reminded of love on a regular basis.

Those ingredients, again, are "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, and honest and open communication." If any of these are lacking, loving is more difficult, if not impossible. Think about those positive relationships you have and how you experience or give care, how you show affection, how you recognize each other, show respect, commit to that person, trust them, and communicate with them. I feel strongly about the communication piece. When communication is not clear, we might feel we are intentionally being excluded or left out. Most of the time communication is unclear because we make mistakes, but it can be harmful for people who miss important messages or misunderstand.

The Gospel of John reading today is not really an Advent passage but it talks about love and salvation. If you remember throughout Advent we have explored how salvation can also be translated as "release" or "liberation." Rather than exploring it as being saved from a person, like the devil, or a place, like hell, salvation can be a liberation from sin and evil in the world. Salvation is a release from all the -isms that plague our world, such as racism and sexism and classism.

¹ bell hooks, *all about love*. (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018), 5.

This John passage is one that really took off in the 1990s, especially among more evangelical Christianity. It was branded in a way to convince people that Jesus was the only way to salvation, and could sometimes lead to a bit of scare tactics. John 3:16 was plastered on t-shirts and bumper stickers: “For God so loved the world God gave the only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It’s a beautiful passage, reminding us that God loves us fiercely and wants what is best for humanity. I often found in my own experience, though, that it was used in a sort of scare tactic to convert people to Christianity. That God loved the world this much, but it was to keep someone from hell, to keep someone from their definition of sinning. It could be used simultaneously with passages that condemned people.

Proof texting, or pulling out a specific scripture passage without any context, though, always leaves out some of the most important parts of scripture. The very next verse reminds us that Jesus came not to condemn, but for salvation - for liberation - for release. So even though this passage has been used to condemn atheists, or any non-Christians, if we read a bit farther, we see that God’s love doesn’t condemn, but is for liberation.

If we put in some of those other words hooks uses, we begin to see a deeper picture of that love - that God cared for us so much - God respected us so much - God recognized us as Their beloved children, and therefore sent Jesus to the world, as a means of honest and clear communication. God shows affection through abundant life, and wishing the best for humanity.

How delightful it is to remember that God cares so much for us, that God came to earth as a human, a vulnerable child hunted by King Herod, a sweet boy who learned from his mother Mary, a courageous and capable man who ate with sinners. God came to earth as all these things as an act of love. Love is not a distant, ethereal emotion, but an action that is present and intentional.

This is the love we strive for in our lives. Yet, we also know we will fail and have to try again. I know that there will not be a day in which I can check all these boxes perfectly, if at all. When showing love to my neighbor I might have care and recognition but clear communication might escape me from time to time. This is why we keep trying, we keep practicing.

The Titus passage is also more of a Christmas scripture than Advent, but I believe it reminds us that Advent goes beyond December 24, and that we have to continue practicing how to wait actively. The author of Titus reminds us that we wait not only for the Christ child, but also the return of Christ, in which justice will be done. As we wait, we remember that salvation/liberation/release only comes from God’s grace, and not from within us. Even though we have moments in which we can channel that grace, we will fall short if not relying upon God. We practice love day in and day out, trying to live with intentionality as we work for justice in a broken world. As the author talks about the world, they are talking about how differently we must approach our lives. Christians are to be transformed and live differently than the lessons of the world. It means that while the world teaches us consumerism and capitalism, mutual aid and caring for one another are valued in faith. While the world seeks to overwork and overproduce, faith seeks to rest and rejuvenate.

As we approach Christmas, just a week away, may we be mindful of the ways in which we love in the world. May we show care to our neighbors, recognizing the strangers, offering affection to those deeply suffering, respect to those who feel unseen, commitment to those who have been let down, trust to those who feel alone, and communicate by first listening. May we be guided by God in all that we do. Amen.