

Advent 4
“Love”
1 John 4:9 – 16

“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.

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

¹⁵If any acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

¹⁶And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.”

So today after reflecting on joy, and hope, we reflect on love.

And I have to say, when I starting preparing this message earlier in the week, I thought to myself, “Oh no.”

I means, it’s love.

I think it’s probably one of the misused and abused words in the English language.

When you talk about love you come up against all sorts of ideas and notions.

Some of these aren’t don’t even enter into our consciousness until someone articulates it for us.

We’ve elevated romantic and sexualised love as the highest ideal.

Sally was born beautiful – there’s no other word for it.

And she realised very early on that she could wield power through her physical attractiveness.

And so Sally had relationship upon relationship.

Sally found herself moving from one partner to another, being rejected and repeating the cycle all over again.

She would say that without a man in her life she felt invisible.

Sally also found that she couldn't bear to be alone and found herself in relationships with men who were deeply unkind or even abusive. And of course Sally rationalised here relationships – it was just a one off; it was out of character, it'll get better; next time will be different – only to find the cycle happening again and again. One day Sally had had enough, what she did do was find a good counsellor. And in that process she was able to see that she was looking to men for her identity and to fulfil the deepest needs of her heart. She said these words: “Men were my alcohol. Only if I was on a man's arm could I feel good about myself and face the world.”¹

Increasingly though there is a push-back or a radical swing.

Instead it has given rise to what is known as “expressive individualism”; the greatest love is to find one's deepest self and then publically express that to the world, regardless of whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religion might say.

One commentator states:

We need to let go of the idea that we *must* have someone else who completes us... Loving ourselves first is what is most important for our spirit, mind, and body, so why not start putting our energy into focusing on ourselves?²

Or on an even more popular level:

“It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free

Let it go!
Let it go!”

In other words you look within.
If you look within, that's all the love you need.

We have to very careful is of inserting our notions of love into what Scripture is trying to communicate.

¹ Timothy Keller

² The Problem With Western Culture's Love (theodysseyonline.com)
<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/problem-with-western-cultures-love>

In fact John seems very aware of this.
In his time there were other competing loves as well.
For a Roman free man to love his mistress more than his wife was completely acceptable.
Love for the Emperor and the state was expected.
Love for ethnic boundaries was to be adhered to.
Holding tightly to religious expectations was a sign of love for a deity.

Yet John says,

“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.

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Jesus the Son of God came into the world to show the world amazing, undeserved, unachieved, unearned, love of God.

He showed this love among us in his teaching, in his miracles and healings, in his authority over demons, in his eating with sinners and tax collectors.

It was love that willing to die for our sins – for your sin and my sin.

You might be thinking, “Oh no, Reece is going to talk about sin.”

And of course when some people hear that they say, “You Christians are always banging on about sin!”

It’s so judgemental and negative!

The irony is that for a vast number of churches in the last couple of decades is that there has been a silence about sin *because* they did not want to be seen as judgemental.

So it is true that at times we’ve talked about sin badly.

But talking about it badly doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about it at all.

What we’ve done badly we need to do better.

We talk about sin because we talk about God’s love.

Even as part of Advent and the Christmas story is sin.

I mean Joseph after he discovers Mary is pregnant with a child that’s has nothing to do with him, has a dream.

And in that dream an angel appears and says to him,

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because *he will save his people from their sins.*”

Then there are some people though who believe that when sin enters the room, Jesus bolts for the door.

“God can’t be in the presence of sin!”

Who’s heard that said or taught?

Sin is more powerful than God?

What does Advent and Christmas tell us?

The God in Jesus deliberately entered into this world marred by sin.

There is a problem in our human nature that all the self-help in the world can’t touch.

You see, all of us have an enemy called “mini-me”, this part of me and every one of us that wants to live a self-referencing life.

Talking about sin is also about telling the truth about ourselves.

Sin seeks to bind us.

Sin when first spoken of in Scripture is pictured “crouching at the door” seeking to control and rule over us.³

What we often do though is we hide sin, or indulge in it, or explain sin away or we try to ring fence it.

All we are engaging in is sin-management.

Truth sets us free.

Jesus sets us free. Jesus consistently told people the truth only because it is His nature but also so they could be free.

And with sin came the awful aspect of this current world called death.

We been hit again by it’s heart-breaking awfulness this week.

Death itself is such thief.

It’s robs us of those who we dearly love.

It’s such rip-off.

³ Genesis 4:7

The Bible tells the story of Jesus when he attended the funeral of his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.⁴

It's here we find the shortest verse in Scripture, "Jesus wept".

Death is an enemy, an intruder in God's good creation.

So Jesus weeps with indignation at the pitiful, sorrowful scene of tragedy. He feels the grief and hurt and pain and at death itself and the devastation it brings.

And then he raises Lazarus from the dead.

John's Gospel goes on to refer to the raising of Lazarus as being "sign."

This sign was pointing out to those watching that there is something of greater certainty for followers of Jesus than even death.

More certain than death is Jesus who has power over death.

All this because God does something radical – he takes our sin and our guilt and wrongdoing and our death on himself.

The supreme form of love is not in found in the arms of lover or looking inside ourselves but it Jesus the Son of God nailed to the cross.

He did it for you.

The Son of God born in a stable was the Son of God who died on the Cross and rose again for you.

That's what love is.

It's this love which is the source of our love for one other.

It's this love that makes loving one another possible because if we're honest, at times, we're not always that lovable.

Sometimes people do stuff that seems unforgivable; yet the love God showed was forgiving love.

It's costly love.

⁴ John 11

You know to finish, it's one thing to talk about God's love, it's another to experience it.

We're told, "so we know and rely on God's love of us."

The word "know" is an experiential word.

God's love is meant to be experiential; to grip the mind and embrace the heart.

And so an invitation this morning...