

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

4) "Love...With an Edge"

Luke 1: 39-55

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I would like to speak to you this morning about love. It is, of course, a rather familiar word. It is what singers sing about...what writers write about, and yes, it is so often what preachers preach about. Love is a word that captures so many different meanings, that includes so many different intentions and spans so many different definitions that it is a word that is easily lost under the avalanche of meaning that it evokes.

Love is a word that has been used so easily, so quickly, so conveniently that it has often lost its edge and become softened in its shape. While love is, I believe, the most important word in our human vocabulary, its over use and its misuse have allowed it to become, at least in the experience of some, "just another four letter word" as referenced in one of Bob Dylan's early songs.

This morning, I would like to speak about love not as a soft and sentimental mood adjuster that makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but as the bold faced, hard edged clarion call that was sounded in the birth announcement at Bethlehem. Yes, a baby was born and yes, there was a sense of mystery, beauty and wonder in his birth that even the world's greatest poetry and music can never quite grasp.

Yet, too often, the significance of the story that we tell is limited to the first two chapters of Luke and the narrative of the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. But there is more to the story. This tender little baby grew up to become a man—a man whose message of love was anything but soft and sentimental.

This baby who became a man gave our world a picture of what love really looks like... a picture that made some people uncomfortable. This love, you see, had an edge to it. It had a way of over-turning tables, of upsetting apple carts and making some people squirm—especially the powerful and the prominent who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and its favorable balance of power.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we consider the narrative of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and the joyous reunion that they had. We are told that the baby within Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" at the sound of Mary's greeting. This description, of course, is shared by Luke in anticipation of the birth of Elizabeth's son, John and the role that he would play in "preparing the way" for Mary's child, Jesus.

It is, I think, a beautiful description, one that lends a sense of wonder and mystery to the unfolding story. But the narrative does not end there. Instead, it continues in the form of what is known as "Mary's song of praise," or, more famously, "the Magnificat." In this great prayer, Mary pours out her heart in praise and thanksgiving—magnifying God for all that God will do in and through her.

This, of course, is the inspiration for untold pieces of great music and poetry that are often expressed in this season. There is a passion and a power to these words that cannot be denied.

It is, you see, a beautiful hymn of praise that celebrates the great love of God, made flesh in the birth of a baby. But please note that it was love with an edge. For this baby would, in fact, become a man who would scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...a man who bring down the powerful from their thrones...a man who would lift up the lowly...who would fill the hungry with good things and send away the rich empty handed.

This, of course, was a message that would play well in places like Nazareth and Bethlehem, places of the marginalized and the forgotten. Not so much in a place like Jerusalem where the politically and religiously powerful shared an uneasy alliance. The idea that someone would advocate a change from the status quo was a threat not to be treated lightly, but with an iron fist and a ruthless will. And so the stage was set for the One who would come, in fulfillment of Mary's hymn, not to placate, but to provoke, not to pacify the powerful, but to glorify God's commitment to the powerless. And he would do so in the name of love...love with an edge to it.

This morning, we have lit the candle of love and that is no small gesture in a world such as ours...a world that lives in the death grip of fear...a world that too easily resorts to violence as a remedy for violence...a world that is all too eager to vilify and demonize those who look, think, act and believe differently.

Allow me to ask, just what does it mean to love in a world such as ours? Does it mean that we love only those that we know? Only those that are like us? Only those that have similar beliefs and feelings?

That is not my understanding of what it means to love. You see, I believe that love is more than a feeling. It is, ultimately, a choice—one that we make whether we feel like it or not.

Can you imagine what marriage would be like if it was predicated only upon “feeling in love?” Can you imagine how precarious that would be? Sadly, some marriages come to an end because the feeling has faded. I suspect, however, that every marriage goes through periods of time when the feeling ebbs in the wake of the day to day stress and challenge of living. It would be unrealistic to think otherwise.

But covenant love is not predicated on feeling. It is predicated upon the choice that one makes to love and cherish, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. There is no qualifier in these vows that makes them null and void in those cases when we don't feel especially loving. No, love is a choice that we make—even when we don't feel like it.

So it is that, this morning, I would like to invite you to make a conscious choice to make love your vision, your goal, your passion, your purpose as you live out your life.

What our world needs now is not just, “love, sweet love,” but, love that has an edge in its choice to be an advocate for the voiceless, the powerless...and yes, even those who are not at all easy to love.

Dorothy Day, the remarkable witness for social justice and compassion, once observed that, **“Love is the hardest thing in the world, naturally speaking. It is not love in the abstract that counts... but love that is personal that matters.”** **Dorothy Day. It is not love in the abstract that counts,”** she writes, but the choice to love **“personally” that ultimately matters. It is never the brothers or sisters right next to us, but the brothers and sisters in the abstract that are easy to love.”**

Charlie Brown expressed a similar sentiment in his simple confession: “I love mankind...it’s people that I can’t stand!” It is, you see, much easier to love in the abstract.

But the love that we celebrate in lighting the fourth candle of Advent is not an abstract love, not a generic love, but a love that was and is personal...a love that was and is specific in its intention to be an advocate on behalf of those who have been pushed to the margins of society, neglected and forgotten.

Soren Kierkegaard, the brilliant philosopher, once told a story about a King who fell in love with a maid. But the King, being King, didn’t how to proceed to declare his love for this woman of low standing. He decided to seek the counsel of his court advisers. After hearing of his concern, one responded, “Well, it is really very simple. All you need to do is to appear at her humble abode and reveal yourself in all your kingly splendor. She will, without doubt, fall at your feet and be yours.

But the King was not satisfied with this suggestion. He did not want the woman’s fear and submission. He wanted her love. He did not want his own glorification, but hers. It was, he could see, a true dilemma. Night after night, the King paced the floor, desperately trying to find a way that he could win the woman’s love. Finally, the answer came to him in this simple truth: **Freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved.**

So late one night, long after everyone in the castle had retired to their chambers, the king silently left his palace and appeared before the humble home of the maid. He was dressed not in kingly splendor however, but in the humble clothing of a servant.

So it is that God has come to us—not as powerful king or wealthy ruler—but as humble servant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. If we want to see what love looks like...this is what love does?

If we are willing to listen to Mary’s song—not just with our ears, but with our hearts, we may discover that there is, within it, an invitation waiting for us...

The invitation to allow God’s Spirit to so work within our own lives, that we too, become vessels of God’s love...that we too, become instruments of God’s peace.

What the world needs now is not just, "love, sweet love," but love with an edge to it...love expressed not in the abstract, but the personal...love that has the courage and the conscience and the conviction to fulfill God's dream for our world.

To do justice,

To love kindness,

To walk humbly with our God.

Amen.