

“Where’s the Love?”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ
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When I was pastor of our church in Rhinelander, there was a Thursday morning women’s Bible Study group called Study and Share. Members would “share” news about themselves or family members or friends, and then we would pray for the people whose names had been mentioned. That part of our weekly gatherings was something like our regular prayer time in this congregation, when members submit names of people and concerns to be read from the pulpit, sometimes with brief explanations about why we are holding them in prayer. The second component of our time together was “study,” when we would read and discuss scriptural passages, usually from the week’s lectionary readings. It was always a bit disconcerting for me, because these would be passages about which I would be preaching the following Sunday, and I always felt like I was giving spoilers for my next sermon, without the alerts. But one member tried to reassure me: “Don’t worry,” she said. “By Sunday we will have forgotten what we talked about today.” It’s always good to have that dose of reality.

Well, I forget what passage we were talking about, but it was one of the many Biblical passages that have to do with love, when one of the members of the group, a retired nurse, told of being asked, during a job interview, why she had chosen to be a nurse. “Because I love people, and want to help them,” she said. “How would you define love?” the examiner went on to ask. Even in recollection, she was embarrassed. “I couldn’t

define love,” she said. “I could only say things about it, or what it isn’t.” On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, I can identify.

So, as we have in the previous three Advent Sundays, I want to focus on one of the things, a really important thing, that our theme isn’t, that love isn’t.

It’s easy to assume that the opposite of love is hate. But I want to suggest that hatred is not the cause of love’s absence; the dishonor of that distinction goes to fear. I am convinced that fear is the opposite of love, that fear in fact, precedes and leads to hatred. After all, the Apostle John doesn’t say, “Perfect love casts out all hatred;” he says, “Perfect love casts out all fear.” Herod didn’t hate the baby whose birth the Magi came to celebrate. How can you hate someone you haven’t met, someone you don’t know, someone who isn’t even born yet? I mean, really, how can you hate a baby? But Herod *could* fear that baby with a deep existential fear, a fear that led him to commit the most hateful deeds.

But there is a deceptive connection between fear and love. It lies in the human temptation to try to compel love through the employment of fear. It was the temptation of Caesar, who wanted to be loved and worshipped. It was Caesar’s minions who invented new and better ways to torture those who didn’t give Caesar the love, who, in fact resisted him. There were times during the rule of Pontius Pilate, Caesar’s loyal local representative, when the streets of Jerusalem were lined with men, considered to be rebels, being crucified, for example. All tyrants have the delusion that they can inspire love by engendering fear, either fear of what might happen in the absence of their benevolent tyranny, or even more ominously, what they might do to their subjects if they are not sufficiently appreciative.

And tying love to fear is the temptation of the jealous spouse or lover who believes that love and fidelity can be guaranteed by the threat of violence or abandonment. Talk to

people in shelters where abused women take refuge from the men who have mistreated them, all the while those men are professing their undying love for them.

Or it's the temptation of the zealous preacher who tries to convince people that they have to love God because, if they don't, God will punish them. Love based on fear isn't really love. It's submission. The Apostle John doesn't say, "We love God because God has frightened us to death with the threat that if we don't, we'll burn in hell." The Apostle says, "We love God because God first loved us." One year in Rhineland, a fellow pastor, who shall remain nameless as will his church, tried to enlist the other churches of the community to participate in a Halloween Hell night, where children would be told about sin, and the torments of hell would be graphically acted out to enhance that message. "So you want to scare kids into loving Jesus?" I asked. "I want to scare the hell out of them," was his response. Our church, probably needless to say, didn't join up.

And every pastor, and many a church council, is familiar with the threat that if the church doesn't back off a loving, but controversial, stance, "people will leave, or they won't come in the first place." Every action, or every failure to act, based upon fear deserves the most intense prayerful scrutiny. Perfect love casts out fear.

If I had to choose one recurring message of Advent, from the prophetic texts through the gospel texts and on into the epistles, it is "Do not be afraid." I confess to preferring the rendering in the King James Version, just because it sounds so much more majestic. And because it resonates with my memories. "Fear not." Four times in the accounts of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus—four times—an angel appears to someone and begins by telling them not to be afraid. The first was the Angel Gabriel's announcement to an aged priest, Zechariah, telling him that he and his elderly wife Elizabeth were going to be parents. Zechariah was so frightened by this news, and so disbelieving of it, that he was made speechless. He hadn't listened to the "Fear not" of Gabriel's message. After the

birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah broke his silence with one of the Bible's most beautiful songs.

And Joseph. Joseph was afraid of the societal derision and judgment that would surely ensue when it became known that his bride-to-be, Mary, was in a family way before they were even married. "Fear not, Joseph," was Gabriel's message, and although there is no indication that he burst into song when Jesus was born—Joseph was the strong, silent type—he was a stand-up guy who never shamed or abandoned his wife. The guy who was going to do a remarkably gracious thing and divorce Mary quietly, did the astonishingly loving and faithful thing and married her anyway, even though he knew he was not the father of the child she was carrying.

The third angelic "fear not" came to Mary herself. Her response to the news that she was bearing a child who would be called the Child of God, the Messiah, was a kind of courageous acceptance. "Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me as you will." Martin Luther said that there were three miracles in the Nativity: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary said, "Yes." Of those three miracles, Luther said, the most miraculous was Mary's "Yes." Mary said: "yes" to love; and "no" to fear.

And the final "fear not" came to those shepherds, and it was delivered by an angel accompanied by a celestial chorus. We'll remember that tomorrow evening during our Christmas Eve service.

Depicted on our chancel wall, and in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, is "the visitation," the visit by the pregnant teenager Mary to her elderly and pregnant cousin Elizabeth. I sometimes think that it is part of Luke's subversive message to us that it is most often the men who are afraid, and the women who are courageous. Look at those two guys in the background, Zechariah and Joseph, puzzling out what to do. In the Bible, men are not used to being bystanders, relinquishing center stage to women. But

remember that Zechariah and Joseph both were at first afraid; only later would they come around.

And then think forward in Jesus' history. It was Jesus' male disciples who were afraid and nervous when Jesus touched the untouchable and healed the unhealable or delivered an unpopular message to the greedy and powerful. It was the male disciples who fled from the scene and hid away in a locked room after Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

But it was the women, Mary and Elizabeth, who heard the scary, but liberating news of their impending miraculous births, and didn't fear the news but rejoiced in it. It was the women who reached out and touched Jesus, literally touched him in faith during his ministry. It was a woman—a Gentile woman, no less—who argued with him and changed him by the strength of her faith. It was the women who stayed with Jesus while he died on the cross after the men had run away. It was the women who came to embalm his body, who found the empty tomb. It was the women who bore the news of Jesus' resurrection to the skeptical disciples. It was the women who testified to what they had seen.

I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with women's openness to love, to their ability to carry another life within their very bodies, which involves trusting in God's miraculous presence in their lives. The women who loved Jesus, loved him without fear. Maybe that's why Mary boldly sang "Magnificat!" Why she didn't sing, "God has magnified *me*: God made *me* important." She sang. "My soul magnifies the Lord. If you want to see God at work in the world, look at me! What is happening to, and in, me will make the world different forever."

Today, the last Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of love, is not a day to analyze and define; that's the work of the brain. Today is a day of the heart: to see, to feel, to rejoice; to listen to music, which is distilled divinity, to delight in what has happened to us, and what can

happen to us through the immeasurable power of love. Today is a day when we remember what love isn't and what love is. Love is God. God is love. There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out all fear.

And today is a day when we marvel at the visitation of two pregnant women, yes, but even more profoundly we marvel at God's visitation to us. God visits us in the miracle of incarnation, God with us. God visits us in the miracle of the communion we are about to share. God with us.

My favorite Christmas poem is Christina Rossetti's poem, "Love came down at Christmas." I close with it.

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Stars and angels gave the sign.
Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?
Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

Love for plea and gift and sign.

May your Christmas be hopeful, peaceful, joyful and filled with God's love. Amen.

