

Love

Thomas Becker

Four beautiful candles: hope, peace, joy, and now the love candle. The fifth candle, the Christ candle, will be lit on Christmas Eve at our candlelight service. A beautiful service of Christmas carols and Scripture readings, a devotional, and then lighting of the candle representing the spreading love of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.

How amazing, and how humbling and honestly daunting, to have the opportunity to speak this morning about the love of God for us. It's a fabulous message. It is the greatest story that we have to tell, the fact that God loves. That God loves the world. And it's such a desperately needed message in our world. Possibly the number one need not only in our nation today, not only in this culture, but across the world, is the need for love. It is a basic human need and so desperately lacking for so many.

I read a survey that right now, about one-third of American adults report loneliness as an issue. And for those between the ages of 18 and 34, that rises to 43%. Loneliness has risen to epidemic proportions in this connected age. These are the generations that apparently are the most connected, but increasingly lonely. Loneliness is more common than diabetes or anxiety. It is linked to increased risks of depression, anxiety, suicide, and even physical manifestations like heart disease and stroke. And for many, this time of year is when it is felt most keenly. And the sad thing is that so many in our world, so many around us, maybe even among us, have no idea actually where to look for the answer because we don't know what love is.

And the message that the world sends us about love is the wrong message. The world's answer is empty. And so many are left tossing from one idea to another without being able to find the love that ultimately satisfies. But the interesting thing is, if we finally get alone and shut out the confusing messages of the world, we do know deep within that there is an answer. And actually, Who is the answer.

Phillips Brooks is the author of my favorite Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Such a beautiful song about how the love of Christ manifests itself in us. He had an opportunity to visit with an 11-year-old girl called Helen Keller. Many of you, probably most of you, know that Helen Keller in infancy was struck with an illness that robbed her of her vision and her hearing. And so she was left in a world of darkness and unable to communicate. At about age eight, Anne Sullivan taught her sign language in her hand, and the world of communication was opened to Helen Keller. And then a few years later,

Phillips Brooks and his wife, who had a great heart for needy children, visited Helen Keller with the specific purpose of talking with her about God's love. And as they shared with her about the love of God, her reply was, "Oh, that's His name! I didn't know He had a name." Caught in that world of darkness, the darkness of her blindness and her silence, she knew that there was Someone who loved her, and she only needed to learn His name and to learn about Him.

And so this morning we come to talk about God's love. And we're going to refer to a verse that I imagine every single person in here knows. You might know it by heart. Certainly you've heard it. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have life: have eternal life.

So it starts out talking about God. That's where we have to begin. And we begin with the understanding that God is the eternal Creator. I promise Danny and I didn't collude when he led us in that singing and spoke to us about the eternality of God, our Creator. We know from the very first pages of Scripture, the very first words of Scripture. Genesis 1:1 in the beginning God. Before time began, before there was anything else, God existed. The unmoved Mover, the Source of everything else that came to be. And so in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Psalms 33:6 expresses it so very picturesquely for us, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry hosts by the breath of His mouth." And the psalmist is calling us to go outside on a dark winter night, to find one of those places where light pollution is faded on to the horizon, and to look up into the vastness of heaven and those stars that seem innumerable. They are actually only a drop in the ocean compared to the vastness and the wonders of all of the heavens. And God in the beginning, with the breath of His mouth, with a single word, spoke it into being, and now sustains it by His own power.

In the beginning, God created. That God is Almighty. The Bible tells us that He is able to accomplish everything that He purposes. He is unthwarted in His ends. He's ever present and all-knowing. Filling this entire universe. We already referenced this morning Isaiah chapter six: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, and the train of His robe fills the temple." It's an expression of Him being present everywhere.

The psalmist wrote about it in Psalm 139, the fact that God knows every thought, that God knows every word, then that God is with us every single place we can go, the darkest, the deepest, and the furthest corner of this earth. God is there. His holiness means that He is perfect in everything that He is and everything that He does. Deuteronomy 32 says that

“Your works are perfect, Lord, and all Your ways are just.” There is not a hint of evil, not a hint of darkness in Him. Everything that He does is perfectly right, and He cannot therefore tolerate sin in His presence. The prophet Habakkuk writes, “Your eyes are too pure to look on sin. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” And so one important understanding of that concept of holiness is that God is entirely separate. In all of His perfections He is entirely separate from sin. He is high and holy and far above us.

We could go on and on. The Scriptures are filled with the glorious descriptions of our eternal, Almighty, holy, holy, holy, Creator God. But one thing that can become lost as we speak of His glories is the fact that He is a personal God, that He is also near. We sing this time of year and we read of Emmanuel, God with us. The apostle Paul, when he was speaking to the crowd, said, “He is not very far from you.” And in His nearness God has chosen to reveal himself to us. That revelation not only comes in the form of this beautiful universe in which He has placed us, such that our eyes can see creation and become aware of the power and divinity of our glorious God.

That revelation is also in His Word because He did not want us to only know of His eternal power and divine glory. He also wanted us to know who He is, and to be able to love Him and to experience His love. And so He gave His Word to tell us about Him. And then Jesus Christ, the Word of God in flesh, was a demonstration to us of who God is. And He did all of this so that we could know Him. God is a personal God whom we can know. Jesus said that this is eternal life. This. You want to know the essence of eternal life? “To know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

We were created for a relationship with the eternal, Almighty, Creator God. And the greatest manifestation that we can know of His personal nature is His love. So we read in this verse, God so loved the world. God loves. Love is an essential aspect of the character of God. Thank you so much, Watkins family, for leading us in this reading this morning. And they read those words. God is love. Not an action: God loves in this way, that way, or the other, but part of His very being is love.

In my various readings, this is the best definition I could come up with. Love, God's kind of love, is pure delight in another. It adores, admires, and rejoices in the beauty and character of someone else. Absent from that definition is selfishness. Absent from that definition is anything that we can receive. It is entirely focused on another, pure delight in another.

And God is love. Now, that's pretty interesting if you think about it for a while, because we've spent a long time talking about the fact that God is eternal, that God existed before anything in all of creation was brought into being. And yet God is love. We think of love as-- and we are right in thinking so--requiring an object, requiring something else that is the

beloved. Did love come to be when God created you and me, because then God had something to love? Was there a change in His character where suddenly this love idea that never existed before came into being because “Hey, now there are people, I can love people”?

And of course, we know that the answer to that is no. We already hinted at it this morning. The idea that God is love is actually a convincing proof of the biblical teaching about the Trinity. God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing from eternity past. In one essence there is one God, but three Persons. God the Father, Who Augustine said is the eternal Lover. God the Son, the eternally Beloved. And the Holy Spirit, the love shared by Father and Son from eternity past. This isn't just philosophy. This isn't just something that you can make up. Jesus talked about it. John chapter 17, verse 24, in what we know as His high priestly prayer, Jesus praying to the Father for us says, “Father, I want those that You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world.”

God in His very essence is love. And God's kind of love existed before you or I, or this creation ever came into being. As Father, Son and Holy Spirit lived together in perfect love and unity. And I'm putting so much emphasis on this because that means that God gets to define what love is, not the other way around. The creature doesn't define what love is and how love is expressed. God, the eternal Lover, gets to define what love is. He did that for us in First Corinthians chapter 13, other verses that you know so well, but just think about them in God's love towards us and then our love towards each other. 1 Corinthians 13:4: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...”

We usually read that at a wedding ceremony. It's actually written for the Church, Paul describing how we relate to each other. And it's also a beautiful description of God's love for us. God gets to define what love is, and that is His definition of love.

When we talk about what love is, of course many of us think of the kind of love that most people are looking for. That is physical affection, sexual love. God gets to define marital and sexual love. His image, the eternal Lover, placed in us. God said, “Let us create man in Our own image.” And so God created male and female in His image. And as an expression of His image in us, He brought the man and the woman together into a covenant relationship. That is God's definition of marital and sexual love. A man and a woman in the covenant relationship that God gave them.

The reason I emphasize this is because the world tries to give us other definitions of love that are empty. That maybe are a near miss, and maybe miss the mark by miles and miles. But never come close to the ultimate satisfaction that can only come from God alone. When we delight in each other in the way that God intended, it is a reflection of His character. But a human-centric definition of love, based on our desires and what we think is right, is a distortion of His image. It is idolatry. And the thing is, in a world that so desperately needs love, it's a counterfeit that can never fulfill.

To use a trite example, it's like opening up that package under the Christmas tree on Christmas morning and seeing the box for the PS5. And inside is a Tandy from 1992. It will never meet our deepest need. And as we pursue fake definitions of love, in the darkness of the night, if we finally shut off all the noise and are on our own we are left still longing for the only love that can really satisfy. And that is God's love. Because God *loves*. The descriptions of God's love in Scripture are incredible. We've read it several times in the past years, hear it again in Zephaniah chapter three. Where God tells people that He delights in us and rejoices over us with singing. Do you want to have somebody who just delights in you and rejoices over you with singing? That's how God describes His love for you.

We see it in some of the relationships in Scripture. Adam and Eve walking with God in the garden in daily unbroken fellowship, unashamed in His presence. Nothing to hide. Everything to share. We see it in the relationship that Abraham or that Moses had with God, in which they were described as His friend. God spoke to Moses face to face as one speaks with a friend. Abraham, called God's friend. We see it in His descriptions of His relationship with His people. Jeremiah 31:3, the prophet writes, "The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.'"

That's what we long for. That's what will satisfy the deep need of our soul. And that's the kind of love that God has for you. We read "God so loved the world." But when I hear preachers preach on this, they take out "world" and they put "you." They say to put your name there. God so loved Tom. God so loved Jack. God so loved Linda. And we can go through the whole congregation. God loves *you*.

It doesn't matter who you are. Doesn't matter where you are at this particular point in life. And it doesn't matter whatever your past is. God loves you. Let's go back to that verse in Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah is writing to a people that have been exiled in judgment, facing the worst kind of condemnation possible. The history of God's relationship with His people is a heartbreaking history. Where, out of love, He called the people to Himself, gave them everything necessary to know Him and follow Him. With powerful acts brought them out of slavery and through the sea, led them through the desert to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey, where His blessing would be poured out on them unendingly. He

didn't have to do this, He wanted to do this. That's His kind of delightful giving love. But from the very beginning, the people rebelled. From the very beginning turning away from Him to false gods, to idols, to the things that they could see and feel and touch and pursue. From the very beginning they refused to follow His ways and to follow His laws.

When He finally brought them to the edge of the Promised Land they were overcome by fear and turned away. When He finally brought them into the land they never managed to completely follow His rules in ridding themselves of the idols, the fake gods that they were surrounded by. And they continued to be divided in their hearts, adulterous in their relationship with the Lord. Over and over He called them back and provided for them, over and over they turned away, until finally He allowed the land to be overcome, the nation to be destroyed, and the people to be scattered across the face of the earth as judgment. And He writes, "I have loved you with an everlasting love."

The prophet Isaiah, writing in that same general period of time to that same people, what incredible words. God says, "You are precious and honored in My sight and I love you." Doesn't that feel upside down? Aren't we the ones who are supposed to consider God to be precious, and to honor Him, and to love Him? Yes. But to that rebellious people caught so desperately in sin He actually says, "*You* are precious and honored in My sight, and I love you."

God loves you, whatever your past might be. It can't possibly be as sordid as the people to whom Jeremiah and Isaiah wrote. But you know what, it might be, and that doesn't matter. One way or the other, we have all sinned. We have redefined reality based upon ourselves and our desires, turning from God's way to our own way. Setting up ourselves as an idol in place of God. Pursuing our ends, our means, our satisfaction, our pleasure. Whether it's in relation to possessions or power or glory, dishonoring God, failing to meet up to His standards of holiness and glory. And yet He loves us.

Now, it's important to note, love doesn't ignore sin. Love cures sin. We're going to talk about that a little bit later. And love doesn't ignore judgment. Love absorbs judgment. The people that we read about are people who experienced in terrible ways God's judgment upon them. And judgment is coming. We read about it all through Scripture. The book of Hebrews says it's appointed to a person one time to die, and then comes judgment. We will all stand before a Great White Throne of judgment, in which every word and every deed is laid out. But to us, with a checkered past, no matter how dark or sordid it might be. And with a fearful future of judgment and condemnation. God says, "I love you. You are precious and honored in My sight." God loves you wherever you are at this particular point of life.

We see this in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus called the sinners. Jesus called the traitors to Himself. He called those caught in unfaithfulness. He called the criminals and welcomed them to Himself. He called the weary and the doubting. "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Jesus called the doubting to Himself. He called the abused and the overlooked and the neglected. He called everyone wherever they happened to be, in that particular place in life, to Himself and said, "Come to Me." In order to pour out His love.

And He loves you whoever you are. Jesus called to Himself the nations. Jesus calls to Himself those who have never heard. Jesus calls to Himself people from every strata of society. Who speak every single language. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord can be saved. God loves you whatever your past, wherever you are right now, and whoever you are. And I hope, if you forget anything else, if you forget everything else, I hope you remember that one thing today and this Christmas season and throughout the coming year: God loves you.

But the verse goes on, goes on to Christmas. God loves you, so He gave. He gave his Son. The best kind of Christmas gifts are the kind of Christmas gifts that my wife gives. Honestly, I'm not a very good Christmas gift giver. The very best I can do is take notes of what people say they want throughout the year, and try and get that for them. But I don't tell my wife I want anything at all. Because I don't know what I want. But she does. She knows me. She thinks of me. The very best gifts are the gifts that are thoughtful and that are born of your interest and knowledge of someone else, and maybe even involve a little bit of sacrifice. Something that's handmade. Something that we have to go the extra mile to obtain.

Well, the very best Christmas gift, of course, is the gift of Jesus Christ. God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son. He gave it because He was thinking of us. He gave it because He's interested in our good. He gave it because He loves us. And it's a gift that came at a great sacrifice. We also read this morning First John 4:10: "This is love. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Two things to understand about that gift of love this morning is first of all, that Jesus, that Baby born in that manger, is the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, the eternally Beloved, who became flesh for our sake. What a gift. And we talk about the fact that He walked this earth, our dusty roads, experiencing the same things that we experienced, tempted in every way as we are and yet without sin.

One of the things that I know I fail to talk about sometimes is that He lived in God's love in a way that none of us were ever able to do. In that unbroken fellowship and that pure delight for which we were all created. Four times in the Gospel of John Jesus says, "The Father loves the Son, and so He reveals himself to Him." He shows Him his ways. The Father loves

the Son. Twice we actually hear the Father's voice. At the baptism of Christ and then on the mountain of Transfiguration, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased."

Now, I've heard those words all my life. I don't know about you, when I hear the words "In Whom I am well pleased," I think of a high and holy relationship. Of course which is absolutely true, but it feels a little bit cold. It feels a little bit distant. "I am well pleased." Imagine Jamie comes in and she's got a report card and I say "I am well pleased." Some of the modern translations, I think, do a better job of helping us feel what is actually said here. "This is the Son I love, with Whom I am delighted. This is the Son I love Who brings Me great joy. This is my beloved Son, the focus of My delight."

The love of Father and Son continued as He walked this earth, and never left until the cross. That's the second thing to understand. Jesus was born to live among us, to live the righteous life we could never live. And then He died for our sin. Do you remember, earlier we said love doesn't ignore sin, it cures it? Love doesn't ignore judgment, it absorbs it. That is exactly what Jesus did on the cross. He, the sinless one, took our place. He carried our sin. All of that rebellion, all of that selfishness, all of the idolatry in which we set ourselves up against God was placed upon Jesus on the cross. And in our place He absorbed the curse of sin, the punishment that we are due, and the separation from God that comes along with it.

The worst punishment that Jesus experienced on the cross is when the Son, who had lived His whole life in perfect fellowship with the Father, cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" And He was separated so that we wouldn't have to be. Then He was buried. But because He's the Son of God, He was able to completely pay the penalty for sin, and He was able to completely absorb the judgment that we deserve. And He rose from the dead victorious, in order to offer us forgiveness, righteousness, life and love.

Not any kind of fake love. Not any kind of cheap substitute. Real, true, eternal love of God the Father for me and you. And that gift is offered to anyone who believes. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

God wants you to experience His saving, eternal love in increasing measure for eternity with Him, and it's available to anyone who will believe. It's interesting that these words were spoken to Nicodemus. Jesus and Nicodemus were having a conversation. Nicodemus was a learned man. Jesus said, "Nicodemus, you're Israel's teacher and you don't understand these things?" And then He started from the beginning to explain the very basics. Being in a relationship with God doesn't mean knowing a lot about the Scriptures

doesn't mean being a faithful old man like Nicodemus. Being in a relationship with God involves the Nicodemuses of the world as well as the women at the well. Every single person, in every single circumstance, coming to the point of saying "Yes, I believe. I believe that I need Your love. I believe that I am separated from You, Heavenly Father. Because of my selfishness, idolatry, willfulness, sin, pursuit of the things that I desire and have defined for myself. I'm ready to lay them aside and place my faith in Jesus Christ. Who took my sin, Who took the judgment that I deserve, in order to give me life and give me love."

My prayer has been, and there are others praying, that if you don't belong to Jesus, that today you will believe and so receive life and love for eternity. This is a good week to ask ourselves, "Who is God?" God is not Santa Claus, who gives us nice things if we're really good. We can never be really good. God isn't a kindly grandfather who says nice things about us. He's also not a harsh, cruel, impersonal force. God is the Sovereign and Holy Creator of all of the universe. The greatest Being, Who with the greatest motivation that is love for you and me, made the greatest sacrifice by giving His Son to make the greatest offer that is eternal life for all who believe. My friend, please receive it today. Let's pray together.

Thank You, Heavenly Father. I pray that in this moment You would open the doors of heaven, as it were, to give us a glimpse of that throne room and see You in all of Your glory. And then, perhaps, like the prophet Isaiah, when he had that vision to cry out, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. My eyes have seen the Glorious One." I pray that You would give us the strength. We are so weakened by sin and decay that we don't even have the strength to understand Your love. Give us the strength to grasp the incredible dimensions of Your love for us. How long and wide and high and deep is the love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. And then if we can just grasp a little bit of it, then to know that love, to experience it. Father, I pray for those who are experiencing loneliness and loss this season. Would You enable them to find the deepest satisfaction possible in Your eternal, measureless, unchanging love? Lord, I pray that even as we read, that we would be a church family that extends that love to others. So that those who lack love in this world will see and experience the love of Christ in our words, in our acts of charity, in our kindness, and our hospitality. And Lord, I pray for those who have been longing and seeking, but looking in the wrong places. That today would be the day that they find Your love in Christ Jesus. In Whose name we pray, Amen.