

"Love"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to your love, and help us to love as you love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Love. Love is one of the most familiar concepts and one of the most used words, yet it's also one of the most difficult to define. I love Deb, I love St. Bart's, I love to go to our cottage, and I love butter tarts. But I love each of them differently. A group of professionals asked some children from age four to eight, "What does love mean?" Mary Ann, age four, said, "Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." Kari, age five, said, "Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other." Tommy, age six, said, "Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well." Noelle, age seven, said, "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, and then he wears it every day." From the mouths of children come insightful truths packed with innocent humour!

Charlotte Mortimer recalls when the teacher in her adult-education creative-writing class told them to write 'I love you' in 25 words or less, without using the words 'I love you.' The teacher gave them 15 minutes. A woman in the class spent about ten minutes looking at the ceiling and wriggling in her seat. The last five minutes she wrote frantically, and later read this 25 word 'I love you' composition to the class: "Why, I've seen lots worse hairdos than that, honey. These cookies are hardly burned at all. Cuddle up - I'll get your feet warm." Love is difficult to define, and we demonstrate love in lots of different, practical ways.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, we hear about Mary's miraculous meeting with the angel Gabriel and the angel Gabriel's miraculous good news that Mary will have a son who will be called Jesus, the Son of God. The scene is described in Luke; a shorter version is included in Matthew; it's in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls; and interestingly, it's also described in the Qur'an, which says:

“Behold! the angels said: ‘O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of those nearest to Allah.’” God loved Mary and through Mary, God loved us all. At the time though, it might have felt like “tough love.”

Mary was not yet married; she was betrothed. According to the customs of the day, their marriage would have been arranged by Mary’s father and Mary would continue to live at her parents’ home for the year following their betrothal. Then Joseph would come and take Mary to his home and the wedding celebration would last for an entire week.

The angel Gabriel delivers scandalous news. And Mary asks a good question, “How can this be?” Mary is told that she will have a baby conceived by the power of God; the child will be the Son of God and he will be called Jesus, which means Saviour. There’s also another revelation revealed by the angel Gabriel; Mary’s relative Elizabeth, who is well beyond child bearing age, is six months pregnant with John the Baptist.

Mary was ‘favoured’ by God, but what an unusual blessing to be having a child out of wedlock; being a disgrace to her family and friends; and testing her relationship with Joseph, her fiancée. And Mary didn’t yet know that her blessing also included raising a child who as a young man would be crucified as a criminal as she helplessly looked on. It’s not what we usually think of as being favoured by God.

If you love butter tarts, like me, it’s unconditional love – the butter tarts don’t have to do anything, and the butter tarts don’t have to love you back. But most of what we understand of love between human beings is conditional and it’s conditioned into us. If you do this, then I’ll do that. We’ve been conditioned in a thousand different ways that acceptance comes after accomplishment, and approval comes after achievement. Only when we achieve, will we receive what we long for: love, approval, respect, and so on. That’s how our world seems to work. If someone says “You don’t deserve this, but I’m giving it to you anyway,” we wonder, “What am I missing? What’s the catch?” Internal alarm bells go off because if something sounds too good to be true, it generally is. Unmerited

unconditional love is foreign to us. It's because unmerited unconditional love is not of this world, it's a characteristic of God given to us ordinary, insignificant folks through the gift of Jesus.

Mary was an ordinary, insignificant girl who received miraculous and totally unexpected news. God's plan often seems to unfold with ordinary, insignificant folks in totally unexpected ways. A young insignificant girl betrothed to an insignificant man, who lived in an insignificant town in an insignificant province of the Roman Empire. So ordinary, and yet, so particular. A particular time (the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy); a particular place (the city of David, in Galilee); a particular virgin named Mary, betrothed to a particular man named Joseph.

This ordinary, yet particular young girl is asked by God to be a creative partner with God in bearing the Christ child and raising him with Joseph. Mary agrees to this scandalous role that God asks her to play. But even more scandalous is the thought that God would enter human life with all of its difficulties, violence and corruption. God enters into Mary's life, and into our lives, into our ordinary personhood, asking us to be creative partners to bear Jesus to the world. The Annunciation is an announcement of great hope for us in the demonstration of God's extravagant love for us. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that God is sending Jesus as our saviour to love us, to live with us, to die with us and to rise again with us to new and everlasting life. Like Mary, our response is, "How can this be?" and we hear in response that "nothing will be impossible with God." God's extravagant love for us is unmerited and unconditional, which sounds impossible. But, by living in faith; in the hope, peace, joy and love of God for us, and letting God's love flow from us to others, makes everything possible.

Newspaper columnist and minister George Crane tells of a wife who came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me."

Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan, "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After

you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him." With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!" And she did it with enthusiasm. For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing. When she didn't return, Dr. Crane called and asked, "Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?"

"Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered I really do love him." Her loving actions had changed her feelings and it became reciprocal.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less." Sharing God's love is a decision that we make.

God loves us all unconditionally. Let's share that love through kind deeds and increase the love in our hearts, in our homes, in our community, and in our world! Thanks be to God. Amen.