

The Advent of Love

John 3:16-18, 1Cor 13:1-13

Friends, the Ready family is a talented, gifted group of people. Mom and Dad are well educated, have good jobs, their kids are athletic and popular and smart.

Yet, in spite of all this talent, when they have to get together and do something as a family – all they can do is bicker and fight, and at Christmas time no less.

It seems that the amount of talents and gifts in their family doesn't help them get along with each other at all.

And friends, the apostle Paul was dealing with a similar situation with a group of Christians in the city of Corinth.

The church in Corinth was filled with new Christians who had been given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit, but in spite of this – all they could do was bicker and fight among each other.

They were even taking their church disputes to be settled in the pagan courts.

They were jealous of each other, they were quarrelling with each other, when they had pot luck dinners at the church the rich ate like gluttons and didn't share anything with the poor.

The worship service wasn't focused on worshipping God, it had become a time for people to show off how well they could speak or how smart they were in interpreting scripture,

or showing how well they could pray speaking in tongues, or claim that they had a message from Jesus to tell others so that they would be seen as important.

All their spiritual fervor and giftedness didn't seem to help them get along with each other one bit.

So this is why the Apostle Paul wrote this famous "Love" passage that we read this morning.

You see Paul knew that the problem in the church at Corinth was a lack of love.

So He needs to help them understand what Love is.

And friends at Christmas time it is all too easy for us to end up like the church in Corinth, or the Ready family...

and for all the time and energy we spend to celebrate Christmas with gifts, pageants, and dinners and services, it doesn't help us love each other one bit better.

In fact it can put us on each others nerves rather quickly can't it?

- Out of my way, I'm shopping for Christmas gifts to share the love!
- Can't find a @#!\$ parking spot anywhere at the mall!
- Kids clean up the family room, company will be here any minute now!
- You're going to be late, but the kids need to be at the pageant practice in ten minutes!
- I don't care if they teased you about being the donkey, you can't kick the other kids in the pageant.

And on it goes...

So it's very important that we hear the good news at this time of year...

Friends, God wants to give us His gift of Love at Christmas time, because without it Christmas is simply dysfunctional family holiday that we dread.

But it's also important to focus on love because God's love is the foundation on which we use all of the other gifts God that gives us as followers of Christ, gifts which help us accomplish the mission for which Christ was sent into this world.

That's how we've set up our Advent Candles this year – Love causes God to send Jesus – He is our Hope. His birth brings joy, because His death and resurrection will lead to peace between us and God which ultimately brings peace to the whole world when Jesus returns.

And friends over the past number of years we've focused quite a bit on learning about grace gifts in sermon series and in our Christ Care groups. We've worked to discover which gifts God has blessed us with as different parts of the body, and we

continue to encourage each other to use and develop those gifts in our different ministries and programs...

But, we need to be reminded that we first need to have God's gift of love in our lives - because without His love, spiritual gifts, grace gifts are actually useless.

Remember...God so *loved* the world... that he sent his only son, so that people can have eternal life.

The Holy Spirit gives Christians spiritual gifts so that we can participate in Christ's mission, which God started out of Love!

He did not send his Son to condemn the world but to save it, because he loves it!

That's what Christmas is about, and we need to hear about it, understand it and remember it so that we can receive God's gift of Love, and live our lives out of that love.

But friends, Love is such a misused and misunderstood word in our world isn't it?

We love ice cream and we love our spouse, we love hockey and we love our kids, we love our country and we love Jesus.

The word is overused and underappreciated and that makes it hard to truly understand what it refers to – a feeling, an action, a thought, or a belief.

But don't worry friends! God describes exactly what His love is all about in the bible.

So Paul begins to tell us about God's love – Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

What a great description of God's Love! But there's more to this definition of love than a list of characteristics. If we could read the passage as Paul originally wrote it in the Greek language it would read like this....

agape is patient, **agape** is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ **agape** does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

You see friends “Agape” is the word which we translate as “love”, but what is significant about the usage of this particular word is that all these characteristics are displayed towards someone *who doesn't deserve them*.

Agape means investing them into someone who for all intents and purposes most likely will not return this kind of treatment to you.

Agape is selfless and sacrificial – and some might even say “idiotic”

We can imagine showing “agape” towards someone whom we admire. Towards someone who acts selflessly towards others, who is hardworking and dependable, and goes the extra mile.

Maybe even someone who is ravishingly handsome or beautiful...

But agape towards the abuser who will abuse again? Agape towards the addict who will use again? Agape towards the thief who will steal again? Agape towards the person who will hurt us again?

Friends, God so loved the world... He “agaped” the world...

The world which is full of people who ignore Him, who don't thank Him for their life, for the blessings which He gives them, who make up false stories, lies about reality to justify their actions, who worship idols and false gods.

People, who continue to hate other people, kill other people, lie to other people, misuse and abuse the creation – again and again.

But John 3:16 says for God so loved – He agaped - He was patient, kind, kept no record of wrongs...He is all that agape stuff towards human beings who over the course of the history

of the world only seem to go from bad to worse and show no promise of redemption or change.

And in the birth of Christ, Yahweh demonstrates his ultimate act of agape – He personally takes on our rebellious, sin infected human nature and is born as one of us.... so that our human nature can be turned around, changed – redeemed!

Friends, God didn't have to bother with attempting redemption. He wasn't bound to try and salvage something of our relationship with Him when we are habitually unfaithful to him.

We certainly understand that dynamic in our own relationships right? But He did anyways...

Friends - Agape is selfless and sacrificial – and as I said before some might even say “idiotic”. But the scriptures tell us that agape never fails. (1 Cor 13:8)

Jesus Christ redeemed human nature because of God's agape love for us, He offered his life as a sacrifice for those who

rejected and crucified him. He died for us – and in a mysterious way when people are confronted with the fact of who Jesus Christ was and what he did, God's agape love doesn't fail – it changes us.

We become a new creations, new human beings in Jesus Christ. We become people who are capable of showing to others the agape that God has shown to us in Jesus.

When that happens friends, Christmas becomes a time of celebrating agape, instead of being a holiday season which we are forced to endure.

The parties, the pageants, the gift exchanges become opportunities to show agape to others...and allow ourselves to receive it as well.

It becomes an opportunity to give of ourselves in the way God gave of himself in Jesus, so that as many people as possible can be confronted with the fact of God's agape love – the person of Jesus Christ... and allow ourselves to be reminded of it and encouraged by it again.

It gives us opportunity to use the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit gives to us for this purpose, not for self glorification, but to glorify Jesus and point others to him...and allow others to do the same for us.

So friends, with this foundation of understanding agape love, we are going to continue to encourage each other to use our spiritual gifts, our grace gifts in all sorts of service and ministry opportunities at Valleyview.

You can serve Coffee, play in the band, read scripture, run the sound system, mow the lawn, change light bulbs, keep the books in order, help in the children's program, drive for the youth events, or clean-up for Inn from the Cold,

But, as we do all this friends, let us never forget that agape love needs to be the foundation for our lives, and for our church and for our ministry and service. It is a powerful force, and it never fails.

We live in a part of Calgary where there are many talented people, many successful and wealthy people, many

accomplished people – but for all the talents, success and wealth there are still broken families and hurting people.

And many of these people can't believe the good news that Christ truly accepts them as they are because they are ashamed and embarrassed that they don't have it together.

They know they are broken and hurting and they don't have it all together – like their more successful neighbors... or like “the good people who go to church”

But friends, a group of Christians who “get” what agape is all about, who understand that God gives us his love in Jesus Christ even though we don't deserve it...

Valleyview is a community where you don't have to have it all together to belong. It's a place where you don't have to hide the areas in your life that are broken and messed up.

You don't need to put on a mask and hide behind a false smile on a Sunday morning when you everything is falling apart. Who wants to do that anyways?

Friends this is where you can come to receive God's agape from other Christians who are using their spiritual gifts to share the agape God has given them – and later on in life you can do the same for someone else.

If we can be honest about the fact that we don't have it all together, friends that will allow our community to truly experience what John 3:16 and 1 Cor 13 are really about, what Christmas is really about.

Christmas at Valleyview is about God's Agape love – the decorations, the lights, the candles – all the seasonal stuff isn't a front which we our hide dysfunctions behind...

It's a reminder of what the season is based on – God's Agape Love – it's for those who understand they don't deserve it but they need it.

I think one of the most moving illustrations of Christ's love I've come across is from the novel "Les Miserables" – which by the way is being released on the big screen in a couple weeks.

You may be familiar how one of the stories main characters, Jean Valjean, an outcast, a thief and criminal is given shelter by a kindly Bishop for the night.

But instead of staying the night, Jean steals the bishop's silver and runs off.

He is caught by the police who bring him back to the Bishop so he can verify that Jean has stolen from him and they can press charges.

However, the Bishop only scolds Jean that He forgot to take the silver candlesticks as well - which had been given to him as a gift...

And I love what the Bishop says next

"Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.... Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good."

It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!"

Agape friends – and it never fails....

May we each experience by the power of the Holy Spirit this week, some sort of encounter that brings home the reality - that the gift of Yahweh's son Jesus Christ is His purchase of our lives.

That it is His action to withdraw our hearts and minds from the dark thoughts and beliefs which hold us captive and rescue us from the spirit of perdition, so that we fully belong to Him.

Agape – God's love never fails.

Amen.