

### **The Gift 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 talent and gifts in their family doesn't help them get along with each other at all.

You know 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 celebrate joy!
- Can't find a @#!\$ parking spot anywhere at the mall!
- No, I'm telling you the sign said it was 50% off – I'm not paying that much for it.
- 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 friends, it's very important that we hear the good news - that God wants to give us His gift of Love at Christmas time, because without it Christmas becomes a dysfunctional family holiday that we dread.

But 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.

And after Christmas we want to begin to learn about what those gifts are, we want to discover which gifts God has blessed us with as different parts of the body, we want to encourage each other to use and develop those gifts... but we want to make sure that we first have God's gift of love because without love, spiritual gifts are 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 friends if we can know what Love truly is...then we can know when it is in our hearts and lives, we can determine when it is absent so that we can bring it back, and we can celebrate Christmas and exercising our spiritual gifts because of it.

So Paul begins to tell us – Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not

delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

But there's more to love than what meets the eye in this passage, there's more than just 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. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> **agape** does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

“Agape”, which we translate as “love”, is all these characteristics displayed towards someone who doesn't deserve them. It is 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 we admire, someone who acts selflessly towards others, someone who is hardworking and dependable, 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?

But 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

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 at Christmas God demonstrates his ultimate act of agape – He takes on the very nature of the rebellious, sin infected humans that we are 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 humanities relationship with Him when we are habitually unfaithful. But He did anyways...

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 became the perfect human being 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.

And friends, Christmas then becomes a time of celebrating agape, instead of being a holiday 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 be learning about our spiritual gifts in the New Year and looking at how we can use them, together, to point people towards Jesus Christ and help them grow in faith.

But, as we do that, let us never forget that agape love needs to be the foundation for our lives, and for our church. 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” do.

But friends, a group of Christians who “get” agape, who understand that God gives us his love in Jesus Christ even though we don’t deserve it, in spite of the fact that we don’t have it all together, will allow our community to truly experience what John 3:16 and 1 Cor 13 are really about.

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.

It’s 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 in turn you can do the same for someone else.

And friends its all because two thousand years ago God fulfilled a promise by taking on human nature, the Word became flesh, and the Son of God was born and God’s gift of agape was given.

May the gift of agape - God’s unconditional, sacrificial and unfailing love fill your heart and your life this Christmas season. Amen