

## What Will Love Make Possible?

Beloved friends, welcome to the fourth Sunday in Advent and our lighting of the candle of love. Today we celebrate the rite of membership, covenanting in mutual support with two of our newer friends. The foundation of our covenant is our common longing to embody love in our lifetimes. As we draw nearer to Christmas as the celebration of the birth of Jesus (who embodied love in uniquely powerful ways), we are invited to wonder: what will love make possible?

Let us pray. Spirit of God, Spirit of fathomless Love, you have gathered us today in this Sanctuary, built by our ancestors in faith on land that has been in relationship with your Dakota and other people for millennia before us. As you invite us to wonder today about what love will make possible, grant us serenity to accept those things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

Today, we complete the circle of the Advent wreath with the lighting of the fourth candle. **Did you grow up with an Advent wreath adorning your dining room table in the weeks leading toward Christmas? Did you grow up in a church that utilized an Advent wreath? Or is our use of an Advent wreath a newer experience in your life?**

I grew up surrounded by a forest of evergreens mixed together with maple, birch and quaking aspen. Every winter, my parents crafted an Advent wreath from princess pine – also known as ground pine and one of the evergreens that is displayed in our Advent wreath. It's a lovely soft ground cover whose sprigs grow to be 6-8 inches long.

Some years, they would recruit us children to join them for a walk in forest to select and pluck princess pine sprigs for the wreath. The pine was woven into a circle around a wooden base, candles were placed in their spots, and a dove was nestled into the pine as a symbol of the Holy Spirit's gentle presence in this season. We would light the candles each evening at dinner time and share in a brief devotional reading before enjoying the meal.

Advent is a season of anticipation. As we've articulated in our Advent candle ritual each Sunday, "... we wonder, long for, and expect the new life that God is bringing forth among us." Across these four weeks, we've explored themes of hope, peace, joy and now love. In preparation for today, I did a bit of research into the history and meaning of the wreath and the candles.

I wanted to come away with clarity on the roots of why the candles are ordered in a particular way. However, I found what I had partly anticipated – which is that Christians across time have assigned the four candles multiple differing sets of meanings. The one consistent message I found was that the circular form of the wreath and the substance of evergreen combine to emphasize the eternal nature of the love of God.

We can find layers of meaning in our completing the circle today with a focus on love. I think any layers coalesce around a conviction that love is foundational to our lives of faith.

Two scripture passages came to mind this week (apart from our assigned readings), reminding me about insights our ancestors in faith have offered about the nature of love that have influenced the story of our Christian faith:

From 1 John 4: 16: *"We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. **God is love**, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them."* So if we believe that the essence of God is love, then the object of our worship, (our adoration, our trust) is that loving energy that empowers our living.

And from 1 Corinthians 13: 7-8: *"There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. **Love never fails.**"* We trust that God (or Love) is ever-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

*God is love... and Love never fails.* We celebrate Love's eternal presence with our Advent wreath.

So let's take a moment to review our movements through the first three weeks of Advent. **Hope** – On the first Sunday, we explored how we might co-create hope, claiming faithful agency in pursuing hopes we have for our personal lives as well as for our shared life as a congregation.

**Peace** – On the second Sunday, we explored how courage is critical for peace making and wondered how we might build deeper, fuller peace through processes of clarifying discernment.

**Joy** – On the third Sunday, Pastor Daniel invited you to explore the concept and experience of grace, hinting at the joy that comes through what he identified as “sudden lightness” and “ease” in moments of grace.

I would suggest to us that the experiences of hope, peace and joy are made possible by groundedness in love. As we claim our belovedness as bearers of the image of God (that is, Love), we become ever more effective in co-creation of that hope and peace and joy.

Let’s dive into the gospel reading for today. Hear again (and read quietly along if you’d like) an excerpt of the reading from Matthew:

*"When Jesus' mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly. This was Joseph's intention when suddenly the angel of God appeared in a dream... When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of God directed, and they went ahead with the marriage."*

**What!?** Joseph has often struck me as an understated biblical character who must have excelled at embodying love.

Here is a maxim that has become an important reminder for me of the power inherent in my (and your) belovedness: *I can do the next right thing*. When it was first shared with me several years ago, I wrote it down on a post-it note, affixed it the back of my cell phone, and carried the wisdom around with me until my pocket rubbed it away. Doesn't Joseph embody that wisdom? *I can do the next right thing*.

I have shared bits of this movie before and want to share it with you today. The 2006 film *The Nativity Story* does wonderful work in bringing to life the story of the first Christmas. If any of you has never seen *The Nativity Story*, I highly recommend it for all that it artfully brings to light of the social, political, and geographical realities into which Jesus was born.

The film particularly humanizes the struggles that both Mary and Joseph must have experienced – both internally and in the space between them. An early scene portrays the betrothal ritual of the arranged marriage between Joseph (a young man of seventeen or eighteen) and Mary (a very young woman of thirteen or fourteen). Mary’s parents host the ritual, which takes her by surprise.

Then she receives the visit from Angel Gabriel one day as she is out doing her household chores. After that comes a scene in which Mary wistfully watches her peers playing a game of tag, knowing that her own childhood has essentially come to an end.

Mary goes on a journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She wonders aloud with Elizabeth about why God chose her to be the mother of the Promised One.

When Mary returns home to Nazareth, she is showing with her pregnancy. Joseph is shocked and deeply troubled, as are Mary’s parents. In a poignant scene involving Mary, Joseph and Mary’s parents; Joseph tells her that he chose her because she seemed to be a woman of virtue – someone who would partner well with him in his life-long pursuit of honor.

Joseph asks Mary outright what she thinks he should do. If he accuses her of adultery, the townspeople would have the right to stone her to death. If he says the baby is his, he would be lying. In that scene, he tells Mary and her parents that he will claim the baby as his own – a difference from scripture, which tells us he decides to divorce Mary quietly.

In the film’s portrayal of Joseph’s dream (our scripture for today), he is going about his daily work as a carpenter when he hears mob-like noise in the center of the village. As he approaches the chaotic noise to see what is happening, a friend hands him a large stone. He finds a crowd of people surrounding Mary, leering at her. The friend shouts, “Let Joseph throw the first stone!” Then the angel appears, standing between Joseph and Mary, inviting Joseph to release the fear he’s experiencing around the decision to commit to marriage with Mary. The Angel invites Joseph to trust God to be working in the midst of the pregnancy and the birth of Jesus.

Joseph wakes suddenly from the dream, heart racing. The next day, he finds Mary in the fields to tell her that he is ready to stand by her and raise the child as his own. She reminds him that the townspeople will look at him with judgment. Joseph assures her that he is all in.

And that is one of the film's many moments of joyful love (the delighted "Yes!" that comes through the hard work of honest, humble, truth-telling and receptive listening – the spaciousness of love). Joseph and Mary share other "Yes!" moments in the film. One occurs as Jesus is born after Mary's strenuous labor and Joseph's faithful companionship of her in the stable (companionship that was typically only done by other women).

Let's return to our own lives then, today, encouraged by Joseph and Mary embodying love. Let us summon our own circumstances within which we might open ourselves further to the possibilities that can only become realities when we are willing to embody strong, vulnerable love.

Each of us can engage in the work of loving. Remind yourselves in the coming days, *I can do the next right thing*. Maybe add a sentence: I can do the next loving thing.

We are each more powerful than we can imagine, especially if we trust Emmanuel (God with us). We are capable of the work of love. Like Joseph, like Mary, we can each struggle on toward the courageous, vulnerable, delighted *Yes!* of love. And we must, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)  
December 18, 2022 (4th Sunday in Advent)  
Psalm 146: 5-10, Matthew 1: 18-25