

SERMON TITLE: "The Gift of Love"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 20, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three weeks, as we made our way around the Advent wreath, we lit the candles of Hope, Peace, and Joy. Today, Eliseo, Jenny, Abegail, and Aaron have led us in the lighting of the fourth candle of Love. Like the other Advent words, "love" is a powerful concept that tells us something about the God we worship and about what our lives should be like, as people of Christian faith.

In my email this past week, I was glad to receive a link to a video created in the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church. The video is a children's Christmas Eve worship service called "The ABCs of Christmas."¹ The 14-minute worship service features children and their parents telling about the Christmas story and its meaning using words from A to Z. I posted that video to our church's Facebook page on Friday. If you haven't noticed it yet, I hope you will take time after today's worship service to check it out and share it with some children you know.

A couple of things in that video had to do with love. In the section for the letter L, a boy asks the question, "I wonder how you know God *loves* you?" And in the section for the letter Z, for Zeal, a little girl asks the question, "I wonder who *you* can share God's love with?"

Our topic today is love. Unlike Luke's version of the Christmas story, which focuses on Mary's experience, Matthew chapter one tells the Christmas story from Joseph's perspective. Reflecting on this Christmas story from Joseph's viewpoint, let's wonder what it means to receive and share the gift of love.

1—LOVE RECEIVES & SHARES STANDARDS

The first truth we see in this Christmas story told from Joseph's perspective is that love receives and shares standards. I like that Matthew 1:19 tells us that Joseph was "a righteous man." If the story

stopped right there, you would already have a sense that God was at work and that this situation was going to turn out OK. Even though verse 18 already laid out the problem—that *Mary* had been found to be with child even before she and Joseph lived together—that bit about Joseph’s righteousness signals that *he* was a man of God. Righteous Joseph had received training in God’s laws. He was a man who was obedient and faithful. He was a man who could be relied upon to do what was right.

And love is like that. Love is honest, trustworthy, and respectful. Love does not cross boundaries inappropriately. Love acts according to good character, even when it’s not easy. Righteous love, Joseph love, just-plain-ordinary love behaves according to clear values and standards.

This kind of love is essential in human life, and it truly is a gift. I think all of us have heard many times and know almost instinctively that a child needs boundaries. In order to grow up well, children need their parents to place physical and emotional limits around them that protect them and help them to feel safe. If we were lucky enough to grow up in a family that had clarity of values and purpose and rules to live by, then chances are we have gotten along pretty well in life. But those children who had no values or guidelines to nurture and shepherd them oftentimes have felt and become lost.

Love does have standards, and that can be a tremendous gift for us to both receive and share. When rules are up-to-date and relevant, those righteous statutes keep us on track, doing the things that promote life and well-being and avoiding those behaviors that would hurt ourselves and others. Clarity about boundaries can also help us avoid risks from other people who might cross a line toward us.

Standards of love are important for healthy relationships, so that abuse doesn’t occur. Over the course of this pandemic, I’ve been reading some articles about the stress and strain that COVID-19 has been creating for some marriages and families. While being confined to your home with your spouse and kids might be a wonderful opportunity for some quality-time activities and bonding, spending every minute of every day in the same small space can also fray our nerves. Whatever annoying habits we had before the pandemic are now amplified in close quarters. Thus, we need all the more to adhere to the

rules about respecting each other's space and time and dignity. And, in case anyone is in doubt: yes, those rules would include sharing in the household and family chores. A Christmas carol that we don't often sing has Mary asking, "Joseph, dearest, Joseph mine, help me cradle the child divine." Then Joseph replies, "Gladly, dear one, lady mine, help I cradle this child of thine." Smart man. Righteous, rule-following man. Love receives and shares standards.

2—LOVE RECEIVES & SHARES FLEXIBILITY

Of course, we know from the Bible story that Joseph didn't get to rocking the cradle immediately. Matthew's story tells us that Joseph's first impulse was rejection and dismissal. Being a righteous man who had standards, Joseph clearly perceived that either Mary had done something immoral or that she had been violated by someone else—and he had no desire to get tangled up in that. But, before Joseph could dismiss Mary from their engagement, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. The angel impressed upon Joseph that the gift of love also receives and shares flexibility.

For Joseph, love's flexibility meant recognizing that he didn't know the whole story, that he needed to take in some new information. No, the angel told him, this pregnancy was not the result of immorality. This pregnancy was the result of God's Holy Spirit. If Joseph responded like most of us would have, he probably scoffed at such an idea. But, if you get hung up about wondering what Holy Spirit DNA and divine genetics would look like, remember, the truth of the Christmas story is so much more than biology. The birth of Christ is a story with spiritual meaning, a story about God's loving forgiveness interacting with the harsh realities of the world. It's a story about the purity of the divine entering into the messiness of human experience, to bring about the best possible outcome.

I often think about this Joseph of the Christmas story in light of the Joseph of Genesis. Do you remember him? That Old-Testament Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. Many years later, when circumstances had totally changed, those brothers came to Joseph in need. Now, with power on his side, Joseph could have easily dismissed them, had them punished, and maybe

even had them killed. Instead, he forgave them, saying, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”² Of course, his brothers *were* the ones who sold him into slavery. That was the true and terrible fact. But all those many years later, Joseph had come to a revised understanding and a new spiritual meaning. Through the help of God, he was able to change his thinking. Instead of feeling only pain, injustice, and terrible anger at his brothers, Joseph came to realize that God is able to work powerful good and restore love even in the most difficult circumstances.

I think the Joseph of the Christmas story was able to adapt his thinking like that. Yes, his love was based on some strong standards. But because his love was also flexible, he was able to accept the angel’s message and believe that God’s Holy Spirit was at work even in Mary’s troubling predicament. This would be God’s way of living with the people. This child conceived in questionable circumstances would be God’s way of sharing in the difficulties of human flesh, poverty, and oppression. By receiving and sharing the flexibility of love, Joseph was able to perceive the birth of Mary’s child as God’s opportunity to “save his people from their sins.”

We adore the Christmas story because of its miraculous aspects of angels and stars and the purity of the Virgin Mary. But, when “love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine,”³ that love came to real human beings with very real problems—with warts, sins, complicated relationships, oppressive governments, and all that is our human experience. The Christian doctrine of incarnation doesn’t happen far away in the glories of heaven. It happens on earth, in impoverished stables with stinky animals, and wherever God is able to help us change our attitudes and perspectives and have hope even in the darkness. Christmas is the celebration and belief that God came into the world and stayed with us, to love us and to make us more loving. If we want to feel that divine gift of love in our hearts, then, like Joseph, we need to learn that, in addition to righteous standards, love also receives and shares flexibility.

Maybe that's what the Apostle Paul was talking about in First Corinthians 13, where he wrote beautifully about the nature of love and then continued with "When I was a child, . . . I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. . . Now I know only in part; then I will know fully." Paul was acknowledging that, while it's good to have knowledge and faith and righteous standards that give us a strong basis, we can't let our love be determined only by those things. The gift of love requires us to admit humbly that our vision is still pretty dim and that there is always room to grow before we finally attain the perspective of heaven. Whenever we are in any doubt about the highest value or what we should do, Paul reminds us that "the greatest of these is love."

CONCLUSION

Yesterday morning, I read the news that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had just released some updates to its General Handbook. The updates cover many different topics, but one of those new statements calls on church members to "follow the Savior's commandment to love others . . . [by] rejecting prejudice of any kind. This includes prejudice based on race, ethnicity, nationality, tribe, gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, religious belief or nonbelief, and sexual orientation."

By the very act of updating their standards on subjects like this, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is signaling to their members that God's love is not static and rigid, and neither should their love be. This is good advice for us United Methodists too. Love requires guidelines and standards, for sure. But love also has to be flexible—willing to adapt and stay relevant, willing to learn new information and change perspective. As we see from the Christmas story of Joseph, standards and flexibility are both parts of the gift of love.

¹<https://vimeo.com/489791437?1&ref=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR3MOQEwsJQGf9pyyKW3YOW0fqGgNC0nVxSib7QghcZSEL69NrhM8w6xE>

²Genesis 45:8.

³"Love Came Down at Christmas" by Christina G. Rossetti, 1885.

⁴<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/summary-of-recent-updates?lang=eng>