

When Love is Incarnated

1 John 4:7-21

December 20, 2020

Among all the famous Christmas carols, the brother of John Wesley, Charles, wrote “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” and “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” We sing both during Advent and Christmas multiple times. We love them. By the way, last Friday was Charles Wesley’s birthday. There is one more Christmas carol written by him. That is “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” On April 29, 2011, at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton the ceremony featured a number of hymns, one of which was the hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” We sing this hymn mostly at wedding ceremonies or on Mother’s Day because it is about love, but when it was written originally people sang it as a Christmas carol. What makes a hymn a Christmas carol? Christmas carols have the theme of hope for the coming messiah, or peace that the messiah brings, or joy in the hearts of people who accept the messiah, or love as the nature of who the messiah is. In that sense this hymn is a perfect Christmas carol.

Without a sermon or any explanations, we know that Christmas is all about love. We bake cookies to share love and buy gifts to show love. We send cards, decorate the house, invite people to our homes, cook special dishes, sing songs, put out candles and nativity, buy poinsettias, have special prayer services, or call family and friends with whom we lost a contact for a while. We may make ourselves too busy in this season, but we do all these because we want to show and share love. It is Christmas! But with the same reason, Christmas can be the loneliest time. A widow cannot put up a Christmas tree anymore without her husband’s help. Lighting candles or decorating the house doesn’t mean anymore without children at home. Empty chairs at the dinner table or quite house without grandchildren is too much to bear. This year everyone experiences it and feels it, because of the coronavirus pandemic. We cannot travel, gather together with the loved ones, or exchange gifts. The isolation of pandemic hits the core of Christmas spirit. We may be wondering this ourselves: is this Christmas? Does it really feel like Christmas? But, actually, it was very quiet on the first Christmas when Mary and Joseph lay down baby Jesus in the manger. Love came down in the quiet stable in Bethlehem. This Christmas may feel like the first Christmas. It might be a blessing for us. Surely, love is coming again this Christmas without loud celebrations. Love is not canceled.

Today’s Bible reading says God is love. It doesn’t say God’s love is big, beautiful, and available for anyone. It doesn’t say, God loves you. It says, God **is** love. The Bible says directly only three times who God is. God is Spirit, God is Light, and God is Love. I don’t think anyone of us, or any human being can say I am love. I can say, “I love you.” But I cannot say, “I am love.” We are not the source of love. We are not love. We need to be connected to the source of love to love. We need to be connected to God who is love, to love ourselves and to love others. This Christmas we may not have many people around us to say, “I love you,” but love is coming to us in human

flesh no matter where we are or with whom we are. Love is incarnated among us and in us, even when we cannot celebrate Christmas with traditions, decorations, gifts, and loved ones.

Love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. For over 30 years our church has shared love during Advent and Christmas season with the people of three non-profit organizations: Inspiring youth, Methodist Youth service and a nursing home in our community through the program, "Whose Birthday is it anyway?" Also, we send love to the children of Olivet United Methodist Church's neighborhood with toys and winter clothing. Because the church has been closed with the pandemic, I was concerned about these winter programs. We were not sure how to do it and how the people of GUMC might respond to it. But without in-person gatherings and announcements, you still remembered them, loved them, and helped them. More toys and gifts were collected and delivered to them than I expected. I was amazed by your love. Love is not canceled this year. I had a chance to hear a young man's testimony who grew up with Inspiring Youth tutoring program which is one of organizations we support. His family immigrated from Mexico. With the help of the tutoring program, he went to college as the first person who went to a college in his whole extended family. He encouraged his younger siblings and cousins to attend the tutoring program and many of them became doctors, CPAs and other professionals. Love bears fruits in places we don't know and at the time we don't know, only God knows. We just need to trust love and keep on loving.

You may think many other churches do the same things or even bigger and better things than we do to help others. That may be true. But that does not mean that our love is canceled because others do bigger and better work of love. God is love and love is not a competition. One member told me since the pandemic she didn't go out for shopping to buy something for herself, except groceries, but she ordered some winter clothing for the children we help. She wanted to make sure that those children have warm winter clothing. I don't know what she ordered but when I talked to her, I felt the love in her heart for someone's children. And I believe God knows her love. This year our church will give 10% of Thanksgiving Offerings to a community food pantry and 10% of Christmas offerings to Wesley Childcare Center's scholarship program for families who need help for childcare. It may not be big, but we keep loving people of our community because God is love and who loves knows God. Love is everything that we don't deserve, but we have, because love is incarnated among us and dwells in us. Without love we are nothing.

The first verse of Charles Wesley's hymn, sings, "Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heavens, to earth come down; fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown! Jesus thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart." Love is joy of heavens. Let me repeat it just one more time. Love is joy of heavens. God is love and God is joy of heavens. God comes down to earth on Christmas and love is incarnated in humanity. So, now God is joy of humanity, also. Because of God's humble love, we also love in small and humble ways as much as we can. Love doesn't expect us to do

only big and splendid things. Love expects us to love in humble ways. God is in small and humble loves. Today love enters every trembling heart. Our hearts are trembling with concerns about the future of our church, the future of our nation, and the future of our children. But love enters in our trembling hearts quietly. We just love God and love each other tenderly, as we pick up a small baby in our arms. God is love. Thanks be to God.