

7 December 2008

Our advent theme for today is love, even though it puts us out of synch with our bulletin covers. I hope you will manage to forgive me! Love is another of those obvious advent themes. Love is what Christmas is all about, after all. God is love. Cute little babies born in manglers are love. Christmas is a time to gather with family and friends, which is why those who have lost loved ones find this such a difficult and depressing time. Even the Christmas TV specials are all about love: George Bailey learns that he is the richest man in town because he is so loved by the people whose lives he has touched. The Grinch hears the Whos singing in Whoville, and his heart grows three sizes that day. Rudolph learns to love his shiny red nose, and Charlie Brown's love for a spindly twig turns it into a beautiful Christmas tree. Love is so obvious that we're fooled into thinking that it's easy. Love, we think, isn't something you prepare for. It's something that happens to you. You fall into it, like falling off a log. It doesn't take a lot of effort.

When it comes to the Christmas story, though, the biggest symbol of love for me isn't Jesus, because let's face it: cute as they are, infants are not very loving creatures. Nor is Mary the best symbol of love, because we tend to take the cliché of a mother's love for granted, even though there are some mothers who struggle with loving their children, though they will seldom admit it to anyone. No, for me the biggest example of Christmas love is Joseph. Engaged to Mary, only to learn she is pregnant. No matter how great your faith, no matter how convincing the angelic messenger who breaks the news to you, that's still really hard to deal with. A couple of years ago a movie came out called "The Nativity." What I loved most about it was its portrayal of Joseph. Even though he believes Mary's story, even though he agrees to marry her anyway and be a father to her child, he still struggles with what it will mean to love this family: the snap judgments other people will make both of Mary and of him, what it will mean to have his first-born son not actually be his. As they're heading to Bethlehem for the census, a passing stranger sees the pregnant Mary and says to Joseph, "What a blessing it is to look at your child's face and see yourself reflected there." But her words only sadden Joseph, because he knows the child will not look like him. (As an adoptive parent, I feel a bit of that grief too.) When the child at last is born, Joseph receives that precious gift of love, but it didn't come automatically or easy. He had to work at it. He had to prepare to receive that gift.

We have to prepare to receive this gift, too. So how do we go about that? Or to ask it another way, what are the obstacles we have to love? Well, Joseph's story gives us a clue in how he fears the judgment of others. As I pondered the question, it seems to me that there are all kinds of ways that we hold back our love, and it almost always has to do with judgment. We don't want to be seen as condoning sin, wrong-doing. We see this most clearly when it comes to loving our enemies. Sure, we can talk the good talk, but when we get down to specifics it suddenly becomes really hard. Terrorists? Child molesters? CEOs who fly corporate jets to Washington to ask for a bailout? What about cheating spouses? Abusive parents? Kids who steal their parents' money and use it to buy drugs? What would it really mean to love these people? And if we love them, doesn't that somehow show that we condone what they've done? That it's okay?

The dilemma is starkly illustrated by the UCC's own Open and Affirming program. When that phrase was first proposed, many people balked. "I can be open," they said, "I can even be accepting to an extent. But affirming? I just can't go there. It sounds like I'm condoning being gay." To which the ONA advocates said, "Well, yes! That's the whole point!" It's okay if you don't affirm, but if you don't affirm then you're not Open and Affirming. It's kind of the point. I think we often want to hedge our affirmation, if not on that issue, then on something else.

And yet don't we say that God's love for us is unconditional? If God's love for us was dependent on our merit, we would be in trouble! Sure, we're supposed to be transformed by love, we're supposed to live good, moral, loving lives as a response to God, but the reality is that it doesn't always work out that way. Yet God still loves us. God loves us conditionally. God is open and affirming, not merely accepting of us.

I haven't been talking about our scripture readings, but as a recap: last week the scriptures spoke about our sinfulness, how we turned away from God and rightfully deserve punishment. But this week God answers through the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people! That her sins are pardoned, and she has been repaid double for all her sins." This is the gift of Christmas, that despite our sin, despite the fact that in the course of time we would murder the man that this baby would grow into – despite that, or maybe even because of it, God sent this baby anyway, this gift of absolute, total, affirming love.

So for us to prepare for such a gift, we need to let go of our preconditions, our hedges, all the ways in which we hold back our love. We hold back because we fear that their sin will rub off on us, that our judgment will be called into question if others interpret us as condoning, affirming sin. The point is: we hold back because we're focused on ourselves. We aren't primarily concerned with the other person. We're concerned with ourselves and what this "love" means to *us*, how it will affect *us*.

Here's another example: a couple of years ago when General Synod passed the equal marriage rights resolution, the ministers of the South Central Conference met to talk about how to handle the impact. In case you don't know, most UCC ministers are ONA. And they were saying things like, "Well, not all of our churches are as far along as others. We hope that those churches will eventually catch up" – as if the churches who balked at the ONA program had some kind of developmental delay! It struck me as very condescending, as if the people who disagree with ONA are ignorant or uninformed, as if there aren't any ignorant, uninformed people on the pro-ONA side! The whole ONA movement is based on the concept of affirmation, so why are we so unable to affirm people who disagree with us? Is it possible for us to affirm one another even when we disagree?

What it takes to prepare ourselves for the gift of love, to truly love one another, is to see past ourselves, to see past those qualities in the other person that we don't agree with or even find ugly, to see past all that and to truly see the other person as who they are, not who we perceive them to be or think they should be. We need to see them as they actually are: a beloved child of God, reflecting God's image. Someone who God loves so much that God gave the only begotten son into that person's hands as the Christ Child. It's to focus on the other person, to celebrate and to affirm the beauty and value in them.

I'll tell you who really, truly embodied that kind of love. Steve Irwin. The Crocodile Hunter. Don't laugh! I never met the guy, but two years after his death I still miss him. Here's why: the thing about Steve Irwin is that he could seek out the nastiest critters, the ones that all the rest of humanity saw as too creepy, too crawly, too scaly, too toothy, too dangerous and ugly and scary. The creatures that the rest of us would be happy if they suddenly went extinct. But to him they were "little beauties." He'd go on and on in raptures about, "Isn't she a beauty! Look at how wonderful! This is my very favorite! I've always wanted to see one of these. Isn't it magnificent?" To him, no animal was ugly. They were all "fearfully and wonderfully made," to quote the psalmist. If you watched the show often enough, you'd catch his enthusiasm. I can't call any critter worthless after seeing Steve Irwin's great love for them.

But it wasn't just animals. Irwin adored all the people around him, too: his colleagues, his wife, his kids, his parents, strangers he'd just met. His abounding love for all these people just gushed out of him all the time. And for all that he always had cameras following him, recording every mistake, every misstep, every blunder – you never saw him get angry. You never heard him swear. You never saw him be negative toward any person or animal. Steve Irwin was the embodiment of unconditional, affirming love. He was a great example to us all.

That's what we need to be like. I don't know if it was easy for Irwin, though he sure made it look easy, but it's what we need to do: give up our judgmentalism. Give up our self-obsession. Focus on the other, and not only see the beauty in them but to *delight* in them, in exactly who they are. To just love. No, it's not easy. But it does get easier with practice.