

November 30, 2014

2 Corinthians 8:8-15; Matthew 25:34-40

“Advent Conspiracy: Love All”

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page.

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace be with you all.

It's great to be here together after the festivities of Thanksgiving and perhaps some of you were out and about shopping the past couple days. Today we are wrapping up our three week 'Advent Conspiracy' series. We've kicked everything off with 'Worship Fully', last week Pastor Sarah spoke about the importance of 'Spending Less and 'Giving More'. Today, we're going to spend some time on the important topic of: Loving all as a quality to guide and inspire how we live this holiday season.

I don't know about you but for me it seems as though Christmas comes earlier and earlier every year. Some say, "Why can't everyone just wait until after Thanksgiving?" Many regard Christmas decorations and listening to Christmas music before Thanksgiving as a violation of that special holiday in November.

I was at Caribou Coffee a couple weeks ago and asked for a spiced pumpkin latte; a nice treat in November. The lady behind the counter said, "I'm sorry, we don't have that anymore. Would you like one of your holiday drinks..perhaps a peppermint mocha?" For some reason, Christmas drinks with peppermint in mid-November is irritating to me. Sure, put up the Christmas tree, cue the Christmas music but have Christmas-themed drinks at a coffee shop...that is where I draw the line!

This year it wasn't just the stores and coffee shops that were bringing Christmas sooner, the weather has been in on it. Granted, it's snowed in early November and even in October in the past, but with everyone getting Christmas crazy, it seems as though the weather is in on it as well. On November 14th, there was a two hour delay for kids in school because of snow. The season of fall was nice but it kind of did a free fall of our calendars when winter arrived.

Thanksgiving is no longer the gatekeeper holding back the Christmas decorations, music and even the stores staying closed to Christmas shoppers. It's so easy to get swept up into the Christmas season it's exciting, it's beautiful, it a time for peppermint mochas!

Then I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a man whose wife died this past year. I realize that there is a whole other side of this holiday season; a whole other side that we rarely think about amid holiday cheer and buying gifts. There are circumstances and difficulties that many of us are dealing with this year. Some of us have lost someone be it a relative or a friend and this will be their first Christmas without them. For some, you've experienced a failed relationship or marriage and this will be your first Christmas alone. Some have lost a job and this is your first Christmas where that stability is not present. Some are experiencing a health concern that is affecting your outlook on the holiday. In a time where many are excited about Christmas and that it couldn't come fast enough; there are others who think that it can't come slow enough.

Jesus encountered such a dichotomy; a dichotomy of excitement and dread. This dichotomy wasn't about Christmas; it was about his life. The words he shared in a remarkable situation in the gospel of Matthew will, if we allow them to, guide us to living in ways that are not only pleasing to God but will give us feelings of joy far beyond any Christmas gift.

The gospel reading you just heard was from Matthew 25. Matthew 25 is a chapter of three parables so the entire chapter is Jesus teaching. He's also teaching throughout all of chapter 24. Chapter 24 is about the end times, when God's kingdom will come again into our midst and Jesus saying that the day and hour of when that will happen is unknown.

The teachings/parables in chapter 25 are three descriptions of what it will be like when the kingdom of God comes to our earth. There's the parable of the ten virgins; the parable of the talents and the final teaching about the kingdom of God being like a shepherd dividing his sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on his right hand-a place of honor; the goats on his left. It's a fairly straight-forward, easy-to-understand teaching about the kingdom of God.

The three teachings were in response to a request of the disciples. The disciples had been with Jesus the entire time and in Matthew we learn of their reactions to Jesus miracles, how they saw him reach out and break down societal barriers of exclusion, and here their request of Jesus comes at a unique time. Matthew includes this detail at the beginning of chapter 23, "Jesus said to the crowds and to the disciples."

Jesus is the main act in town. Jesus is the one people are coming to see. Jesus is the center of a movement, of which the disciples were chosen to be a part of, that is changing how people lived. Jesus, many were saying and some believed, is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, born in a lowly town of Bethlehem to a poor couple. Jesus was a man of the people!

You can just imagine the excitement that is surrounding Jesus and the disciples having that subtle sense of pride of being in the inner circle. In this excitement, they ask Jesus privately, "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of you coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3) They want to know when the big show will happen, when Jesus will come out on top over oppressive Rome and they can bask in the prestige of knowing they helped bring something great to the world. Naturally, they are excited, they are eager, and they are looking out for themselves. The arrival of Jesus in power and glory as God's kingdom reigns can't come fast enough!

Jesus, then says some powerful words. Powerful, convicting words because these words sum up his entire life. They were the reason he was born in Bethlehem with angels singing and shepherds and three wise men traveling to worship him. They were the reason he lived by giving of himself in order to make the lives of others better. These are words that sum up everything he did-healing lepers, eating with sinners and tax collectors, doing things that made him not even welcome in his home town! It was all about two things: loving all.

He says this to the disciples about the sheep chosen to be at God's right hand, a place of honor: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." That's a bold statement. You can't buy that in any store for Christmas. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." He shares a few more statements and the disciples are not excited but confused since they ask, "Lord, we did we see you hungry and feed you and thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothes you?" (Matthew 25:37-38)

Jesus replies, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

Matthew doesn't include any description of the disciple's demeanor when Jesus said these things. Though I

envision their excitement and outlook on what they hoped to receive was replaced with a powerful conviction of 'the big picture'. The big picture that encompassed all of Jesus' life and teaching summed up by these powerful words rather than focus on one, big event off in the future. Their personal interest replaced by looking out for the interests of others. I'm sure Jesus finished talking and it was quiet in the room. Life is not about personal gain and self-righteous behavior. Jesus says it's about what you do to serve and love others.

I told you that Jesus faced a dichotomy between excitement and dread. The excitement was the anticipation of God's glorious kingdom on earth that the disciples were looking forward to. The dread is in this subtle fact in the gospel of Matthew. This final teaching of Jesus, about loving all people being the cornerstone of his life and ministry, is followed by Matthew chapter 26 titled "The Plot to Kill Jesus". This is followed by "The Lord's Supper" and "Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial", "Jesus Arrested", "Jesus Before Pilate", "The Soldiers Mock Jesus", the "The Death of Jesus" and "The Burial of Jesus" and "The Guard at the Tomb".

The end of Jesus' ministry on earth couldn't come slow enough. He knew what God's love for the world would require of him. He knew his message of 'loving all' would, eventually, get him killed.

The world didn't like that message. The world still doesn't like that message. The message of loving all is so simple, it's the reason the Son of God walked on this earth, but it's not a message we like to hear. Consider the realities of life: you've been wronged by someone-family member or friend. Someone has offended you. Someone has talked about you behind your back. Someone has lied to you. Someone has more stuff than you. Someone is going to get more presents than you at Christmas. Someone can afford those expensive gifts. Someone is overly critical of you. I can go on about the someone's that you don't want to love.

Perhaps, that is why, Jesus saved his words about 'loving all' as his final teaching before his death. Words that were not only spoken and lived out in what he did, he died for them. All so that you will know God's overwhelming, God's unconditional, God's ever-present love for you. It was that love that led to the final chapter of the gospel of Matthew and its title. The title of chapter 26 is 'Resurrection'-a word of abundant forgiveness, ever-lasting hope and abundant joy.

We are in a season of excitement and we can be selfish in all that we buy or thinking about what gifts we would want. While we look ahead to Christmas Eve and the celebration it brings; family and relatives together; going to worship in a packed church to sing "O Come and Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night"; sitting down to a meal surrounded by Christmas decorations, a beautiful Christmas tree surrounded by presents of all sizes. It is exciting. We are kind of like the disciples, as we wait for something great to happen.

Today, at the end of this Advent Conspiracy series, Jesus shifts our focus to love. Yes, it is simple. Yes, it is challenging. Yet, it is expected of you as a follower of Jesus Christ. Imagine, what you could do this Christmas season by making this a goal-to model love where it is needed most: in a fractured relationship, buying gifts for people living in poverty, or simply choosing to spend time with God in devotion and prayer in this busy season. Truth of the matter, you are excited and you may be dreading the upcoming season. This season magnifies both our joys and disappointments. With all that goes into Christmas and this month of December, isn't love what we want the most...for our lives, those in our lives, for all people? Is it gifts? Is it more stuff?

Let's do Advent and Christmas different, let's conspire to do it differently together, let's worship God fully, let's spend less on gifts and give more to those in need, and in it all-let's live out God's greatest gift given to us, the love of Jesus Christ as we love all. Amen.

