

# St James United Church

Message for December 19, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Advent



“The Legacy of Love” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 1:39-45; Luke 1:46-55; “Annunciation” by Marie Howe

Well, here we are. It’s the final Sunday of Advent. Time to reflect on the last gift, the gift of love. But what do we mean by love, especially as it relates to Jesus whose birth we will celebrate in a few days? As you’ve come to know these past few months, I have a number of authors on theology and spirituality that I like to read, like Desmond Tutu whom I referred to last week. C.S. Lewis is another. I mostly read his books when I was in seminary. One I appreciated was *The Four Loves*. I find that it sheds light on our last gift, especially when examined alongside today’s readings about Mary and her visit to her cousin Elizabeth.

So, what did I learn from C.S. Lewis? First, is that love isn’t one reality but many, evident in how some languages use multiple words to describe what we mean by that one reality. True in Greek, Lewis looks at the four words that most align to English - *storge*, *philia*, *eros* and *agape*, that is, affection, friendship, romantic love and charity. Lewis offers many insights in regard to love and our spiritual lives, but the most pertinent for today are, one, that while each is a gift, they can turn negative, and two, that while they are all dependent on context, these aspects of love find their fullest meaning in God’s love, as I would describe it, the spiritual reality at the heart of all things and which is drawing us to a more just and compassionate future.

So how do these relate to Mary’s story, and as importantly to our stories? At first glance, the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary illustrates *storge*, familial affection, especially between generations. After all, no sooner does Mary hear from Gabriel that her older cousin is also pregnant, than she rushes off to see her. This is what you do in a family - spend time with one another and more so look after one another. That’s why the newest wave of the pandemic is so worrisome. It feels like we’ll be back to square one, having to isolate from loved ones to protect each other, especially elder family members. *Storge* is most expressed in the love between parent and child, essential for a baby’s healthy development. We see this pair bond between Elizabeth and John as she says that upon Mary’s arrival he leapt in her womb. You’d think the same would apply to the pre-born cousins, John and Jesus, but it’s really *philia*, the love of siblings or close friends, equals offering each other support, encouragement and good-natured rivalry. Think John and Jesus in the wilderness. It’s a big part of what I’ve been speaking about these weeks, our hope for peace made possible when we look to another and see a sibling, an equal deserving of love, respect and care. The emergence of a new variant seems to me a failure in this regard, those of us in the Global North not treating folks in the Global South as

siblings and so needing vaccines as quickly as we do. It may sound trite, but true just the same, that the pandemic is not over anywhere until it's over everywhere.

What I find most intriguing in the story is the role *eros* or romantic love plays, or rather doesn't play. Sadly, we've historically treated Mary's pregnancy through the Spirit as proof we need to be suspicious of sexuality, as if the attraction that's part of *eros* is proof of our sinful nature. We have even taught that original sin was transmitted to each of us via sexual union. Fortunately, Christianity has become more sex positive, recognizing sexual intimacy as a blessing, a way for two people to grow closer to one another. In fact, more and more there is openness to sex as spiritual, akin to the Jewish teaching that sex can be a mitzvah, a holy act. Further, mystics use erotic language to speak of our ultimate goal, union with God. To be fully experienced after death, openness to divine union is nurtured in prayer. Marie Howe describes it as swimming in God's shining, known fully as herself yet no longer just herself but connected in divine love. *Eros* can open us to this, the sexual imagery in the Song of Solomon reminding us of just that.

As beautiful as *eros* can be, it can become twisted by dynamics of power and control. Add to this a similar shifting of the bond between parents and children, especially of fathers, and we end up with patriarchy, as fathers, brothers, adult males exercise power over women. Another favourite author of mine, Brian McLaren, posits that the virgin birth isn't a judgment of sexuality but patriarchy, institutionalized sexism. This isn't to condemn Joseph. Like many supportive and loving husbands and fathers, he accepted Mary and Jesus, but if we struggle with patriarchy in our time, consider in Jesus' time when Joseph was in his rights to reject Mary and Jesus, even if it meant their death. Empire, hierarchy shorn up through military might, is patriarchy on steroids. In the virgin birth, God chooses the compassion and nurture of motherhood as the model of how we should be together rather than the violence and control of patriarchy and empire.

As I've shared these weeks, God is drawing us toward a just and compassionate world that will bring lasting peace and joy, *storge* merging with *philia*, nurture and caring for everyone, all of us as siblings with God as our mother. Mary understood the impact of this, heard in what she sang to Elizabeth, the powerful deposed and the lowly raised, the well fed turned away as the hungry are fed. It's not to make an inverted hierarchy. It's distributive justice, the world changed not by 'helping the needy' but sacrificing for others so there is equity and justice for all. As we now face Omicron, we need to be charitable, showing *agape* as we look out for each other and let go of individual wants in aid of the common good. I know we're tired but we're resilient too, especially as we show patience, encourage others, seek help when we need it. *Agape* is profoundly shown in Jesus on the cross, but also in a manger, not God almighty but vulnerable. When we love this way, letting go for others, God's love flows through us and binds the world into one.

Friends, there are many faces of love - the love of parents and children, of family, of friends, of lovers, love which gives and sacrifices for others. Each in its own way opens us to each other, and opens our hearts to God's love. We need that love most of all, a love that changes us and so changes the world. Jesus was born to bring us this legacy. May we in turn make this legacy our own. Amen.