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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
24 December 2024

Sermon on 1 John 4:9-14

Worship Theme:

**HEAVEN'S BEST GIFT IN EARTH'S UNLIKELIEST PLACE**

When the president visits a city, his agenda generally does not include spending time with common, ordinary people. If that is the case when the president makes a visit, what should we have expected when the Son of God came to earth? Not the events of Christmas Eve! The first guests Jesus receives are not kings or emperors, but humble shepherds. Because God put heaven's best gift in earth's unlikeliest place, there will always be room at the manger for you. You can know with certainty that God gave this gift—and all the gifts he brought with him—“to you.”

Sermon Theme: **“This Is How God Showed His Love”**

1. He Sent His Son to Save the World
2. He Sent Us to Love One Another

How do you show love? Maybe that question has been on your mind a lot lately. At Christmas, we want to show love and appreciation to all the people who are special to us. It's not always easy though, right? We worry and fret over what to do, because it's so hard to find the perfect way to show someone how much we love them and it seems like there's no way to capture our love for each person in a one-size-fits-all – it's tough to show love to everyone!

Maybe you're familiar with the Five Love Languages, an idea proposed in a book about 30 years ago which says people show love and feel love in five main ways: words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, receiving gifts, and acts of service. While many people feel loved in more than one of these ways, very often some are quite strong and others hardly register for them at all. It might be that someone feels most loved when people speak kindly to them and praise them, or perhaps when they set aside time just to be together without any distractions. For others it could be snuggling together on the couch, or even just a hug or a handshake whenever you see them. Some feel most loved whenever someone put thought and time into picking out something special to give them, and for others it might be as simple as they didn't have to vacuum the floor or do the dishes because someone else did it already.

This idea became wide-spread and well-known because people related to it quite strongly and discovered that many misunderstandings came from someone trying to love them “the wrong way.” We often show love the way we like to be loved, but the lesson in the book is that love needs to be shown the way the receiving person will feel loved, not the way the giving person feels loved. Otherwise, while the giver may have the greatest of intentions and may think they are showing the most love and affection they possibly can, the receiver may wonder if they are even loved at all.

The book does a decent job teaching how to love people, but it doesn't necessarily take into account the bigger question: SHOULD we be loved? After all, we are far from perfect and often we know it all too well. We rarely do the things we should and frequently do the things we shouldn't. In other words, we sin countless times every day. Nothing that we say, think, or do makes us worthy of being loved, not even by another sinful human being.

So if it's true that we don't even deserve love from other people, then what about from God? God is the most holy and righteous and perfect being that has ever existed. He makes it abundantly clear all throughout his Word that he hates sin, he cannot tolerate it, it makes someone unworthy to be in his presence, it deserves nothing but eternal punishment and death, and it disqualifies a person from heaven. That remains the case even if we only commit ONE sin in our entire lives. And we know very well that we've committed a countless number of sins beyond ONE.

So should God love us? The answer is a massively resounding "NO – he shouldn't." We may be able to fool others into thinking we're good people and that they should love us, but there's no fooling God. God knows all things and cannot be fooled by anyone. God's love is something we should never have or know.

Yet Christmas tells a different story. The fact that you and I are gathered in this church tonight means that, even though the human race has never done anything to deserve it, God's love has come anyway. The Bible calls it "God's grace" – the undeserved love God has for sinners. The completely real and true story about that amazing and wonderful grace begins at Christmas. 1 John 4 says it this way: ***God showed his love among us.***

This is difficult for us to grasp and understand, because we know it's always easier to show love to someone who loves us in return. It's not hard to give gifts to people we get gifts from, and it's not hard to do an act of service for someone who does an act of service for us. But we did absolutely nothing for God! All we did was disobey him and ruin his entire Creation. Yet the message of Christmas is not a message of condemnation, judgment, or punishment; it's a message of LOVE!

And it doesn't just say "God loves you" in a generic way, leaving us wondering what to look for and how we'll ever know if that's true or not; no, God's Word tells us very specifically – ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world.*** That's Christmas! Tonight we stand alongside Mary, Joseph, a few shepherds, and 2,000 years of Christians and we peer into the manger to once again marvel at and celebrate the greatest and most powerful way we've ever been loved: God sent his Son.

Maybe that's something we don't ponder and think about as often as we could. Maybe you've heard this a hundred times before and it doesn't really have the shock value it used to have. Or maybe this is your very first time hearing it and you're trying to wrap your head around how this could ever happen and why it's such a big deal. No matter where you fit in between those two options, John's words of awe and amazement also become ours as we see WHY this is love and exactly what this love means for us.

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.<sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Remember what we said before about how our sins make us unworthy of any love from anyone, and especially unworthy of any love from God? That truth about us is what makes the coming of God's Son such an incredible act of love – Jesus came anyway, to take away every last one of our sins, freely and forever.

Jesus came into the world so *that we might live through him*. So it's true that God hates sin, and yet he is filled with love for people. It's true that God cannot tolerate sin, so he promised it would be dealt with. It's true that sin makes someone unworthy to be in God's presence, so he promised to make us worthy himself. It's true that sin deserves nothing but eternal punishment and death, and yet God willingly chose to punish himself for it rather than us. And it's true that sin disqualifies a person from heaven, yet if God has removed every sin from that person, then heaven stands wide open before them.

That's the kind of life Jesus gives us! When he came into the world at Christmas, God's plan to save humanity from sin, death, and hell was finally being fulfilled. Why? Because *he loved us!* How? *He sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* We often define the word "atone" as something that makes someone "at one" with someone else. In other words, it restores a broken relationship and establishes harmony and peace once again. When sin broke our relationship with God and sent us on a path of eternally separation from him, God sent his own Son into the world to take us off that path and to bring us back into harmony with him. The only way that could happen was by removing our sins forever, and so Jesus did exactly that by laying down his own life and sacrificing himself on the cross. Jesus may be an adorable baby in the manger tonight, but his coming means absolutely nothing if he doesn't also lay down his life for us on the cross. God the Father himself said that's why Jesus was sent!

And that's what makes tonight such a powerful and joyful celebration – Jesus DID go to the cross, he did die in our place as a sacrifice for all sin for all people for all time, and therefore the first coming of the Savior is one of the greatest moments in all history. People who witnessed it also recorded it, so that all generations would know: *We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.* Those words were written by John, someone who was there, someone who saw it unfold – everything God had planned from eternity. Jesus was born, Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again – all to proclaim his victory and ours forever!

And the best part about it? This gift of love is a one-size-fits-all. It's not a gift to worry and fret over, wondering if the recipient will know and understand the love behind it. It's God's love and it's for you, and for me, and for absolutely everyone – God's love leaves nobody out! He spoke beautiful authoritative words of pardon, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and life. He lived, died, and rose to open heaven for us so that we will be together with God for all eternity! He physically healed and raised and lifted and helped people while on earth, and he still

physically comes to us in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, washing us clean and strengthening our souls. He not only provided himself as the greatest gift, but also provides for our needs in this world (physical and spiritual!) every day as a gracious gift from his hand. And he served us in every way we would ever need, guarding us, guiding us, sustaining us, and providing a perfect eternal home for us. Regardless of which love language speaks most to you, Jesus covers them all. God's love for us is the most sure and certain love we will ever experience, and it's ours freely as a gracious gift.

Then God gives us a wonderful opportunity: *since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*. I don't know how you best show love or how you prefer to receive it. But this I do know: Because God has so greatly loved us, we have the privilege of sharing his love with as many people around us as we possibly can. And it's all because of Christmas! For ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*** <sup>10</sup> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* <sup>11</sup> *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* <sup>13</sup> *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.* <sup>14</sup> *And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*

Let's pray:

O Lord, we praise you and we bless you for the priceless gift of your Son at Christmas and for pouring out such priceless undeserved love on us, changing our entire lives by making us your dear people forever. Keep us always closely connected to you by faith, until we see you face-to-face for all eternity. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.