Series: The Gifts of Christmas

Message: The Gift of Love

Text: John 3:16

Theme: Advent, Love

Date: December 9, 2018

Location: Christ Community EFC

What would Christmas be without the songs and carols?

Maybe a little saner, you say? Maybe a little more PC?

Today we are going to play a little game. It’s called “Name That Christmas Song.”

I’ll read a phrase from a well-known holiday song, and you try to think of the song title. Ready? Here we go.

We’re snuggled up together like two birds of a feather would be. (“Sleigh Ride”)

When we finally kiss goodnight, how I’ll hate going out in the storm. But if you really hold me tight, all the way home I’ll be warm.

(“Let It Snow”)

Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree won't be the same, dear, if you’re not here with me.

(“Blue Christmas”)

Please have snow and mistletoe and presents under the tree.

(“I’ll Be Home for Christmas”)

Mistletoe hung where you can see every couple tries to stop.

(“Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree”)

In the meadow we can build a snowman and pretend that he is Parson Brown. He’ll say are you married, we’ll say no man. But you can do the job when you’re in town. (“Winter Wonderland”)

Okay, if you couldn’t get any of those, here is one for the rest of us.

Hint: The song title is the same as the lyrics!

All I want for Christmas is you. (“All I Want for Christmas Is You”)

Do you notice a theme here?

Valentine’s Day may get all the glory for being the holiday of love, but it’s pretty clear that Christmas holds a corner on the market as the season of love and romance.

In fact, in the “American Wedding Study” conducted by *Brides* magazine a couple years ago, researchers found that 19 percent of all engagements occur in December, making it the most popular month to get engaged.

And can you guess what day is the most popular to pop the question?

Statistics show that Christmas Eve is the most popular day for engagements.

Sorry, Cupid, more people get engaged on Christmas Eve than on Valentine’s Day.

December 24th, 1997 I gave Dana my Grandmother’s engagement ring and ask her if she would marry me.

Data released by Facebook last year showed that Christmas Eve is the most popular day to get engaged, followed by Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, and then Valentine’s Day.

And there is certainly nothing wrong with celebrating love during this season. If someone gets engaged this Christmas Eve, I will wholeheartedly celebrate with them.

But depending on where you find yourself in regard to romantic relationships at the moment, all this love in the air can bring happiness and expectation or loneliness and isolation.

Either way, too much focus on cuddling in the cold and meeting under the mistletoe can blind us to the real love story of Christmas.

So my challenge for us this morning is that we don’t miss the true story of love this season.

This is the love story that has been written for *all* of us. The story of true, faithful, unending, sacrificial love.

God’s love in sending Jesus is the one love that changes *everything*.

Love has been God’s story from the beginning. From the moment of creation, God’s love was part of the fabric of our world.

God’s love was with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden both before and after sin entered the world.

God showed His love by saving Noah and his family from the flood and giving them a new start.

In the Old Testament God gave the commandments and law in love as a way for His people to atone for their sin and stay connected to Him.

And His love turned the world inside out when He sent His Son to live among us—the God of the universe to be born in a stable, die on the cross, and rise again from the grave.

It took love to disrupt and overturn the power of death and evil.

The story is not about a feeling though.

It’s God’s story of love in action—how the God of the universe loves you so much that He left everything in order to be with you, to sacrifice His life that you could be with Him.

This love is the gift of Christmas we’ll unwrap this morning.

Have you been with children as they unwrap gifts on Christmas? The excitement of ripping off the paper is quickly replaced by the excitement of opening up the box and actually playing with whatever toy or game is inside.

The worst thing in the world is a gift without batteries or a gift that requires adult setup.

A child want to unwrap and dive in.

That’s what we are going to do today with the gift of love—dive right in.

So what do we do with this gift of love?

**1. Accept His Love**

I’m going to guess that if I just say the reference John 3:16, many of us in the room hear the familiar verse run through our heads automatically.

Just in case, it goes like this: “**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**”

The problem is, sometimes we are so familiar with this verse that we can recite it and look right past it, but God’s love in sending Jesus is the one love that changes *everything*.

We know the verse so well that we can overlook it if we’re not careful.

But this was and is the ultimate gift and act of sacrificial, holy, complete, and infinite love.

The message of this verse is the core of what we believe. So it makes sense that as we unwrap the gift of love today, we should start here at the center: God loved the world. He gave His Son.

When we accept that gift and believe in Him, we are given His life—salvation and eternal life.

So the first thing we do with the gift of God’s love is so basic it’s easy to overlook. We must accept the gift.

Notice I said “basic” not “easy.”

For some of you here today, this step of accepting the gift of God’s love and believing in Jesus may be very difficult.

It may be something you’ve struggled with for a long time, it may be a brand-new idea for you, or it may be a gift you’ve neglected for a while.

Maybe you feel unlovable. Maybe you’ve been burned by human love too many times to trust that there’s something greater.

Maybe you think, *You don’t know what I’ve done. You don’t know the dark secrets and doubts and fears and pain inside.*

Maybe I don’t, but God does—and the love He offers sees and knows and understands. The love that God offers is Jesus Christ.

No matter what challenges or hurts you hold, God’s love can handle them and heal them. Wherever you are on your journey is okay.

God knows. He understands. And His response is His open arms of perfect love.

Wherever you are, I encourage you to accept the gift of God’s love.

Let this season of Advent be one of accepting the love and salvation God offers in His Son.

So we must accept His love and we must…

**2. Experience His Love**

During this season of Advent, may we all also experience the love of God—deeply.

It’s easy to be distracted by all the things that need to get done in the next few weeks.

It’s easy to read the headlines and wonder if love really can overcome the darkness and hatred in our world.

It’s easy to allow worry over tomorrow—or next week or next year—to overwhelm us and keep us from feeling loved.

All those things matter—God does not ask you to ignore those things in order to experience His love.

You don’t have to purge or rid yourself of hurry or worry.

He invites you to bring them to Him, to surrender the deepest hurts and concerns of your life to Him and allow Him to fill you and renew you with His love.

And the good news is that the love He gives through His Son Jesus Christ is enough.

The apostle Paul described that love we can experience in Romans 8:38–39: “**For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**.”

This is a powerful love—the most powerful love.

It is love that can’t be contained or constrained by any power in the universe, not evil, not death, no person or power.

But it is love to be experienced.

If we want to go back to our example of a child on Christmas day, this is not a gift to accept and unwrap and then put on a shelf with an elf.

It’s more like a new favorite stuffed animal to embrace and carry and hold and love till its ears wear off—or a complete set of clothes to put on and live in.

And, no, these examples don’t begin to do God’s love justice, but I hope you get the idea.

God’s love is our lifeblood and the oxygen coursing through us to continually fill us with life.

Let this season be one of embracing God’s love fully and experiencing His love in new and deep ways as we continually open our hearts and hands and minds and lives to Him.

Having accepted His love and as we experience His love let us…

**3. Share His Love**

Have you ever been in love? If so, there’s a good chance you’ve done something loud or crazy to proclaim your love to the world. Right?

Maybe you literally shouted it out loud in public.

Certainly nowadays you proclaimed it on Facebook or your social media platform of choice.

Did anyone propose to your wife on a Jumbotron screen?

It’s what we humans do. It’s why we have centuries’ worth of poetry and novels and plays and songs about love.

When we are in love, it shows. We can’t help it. Love overflows.

The gift of God’s love is the same way—it’s for sharing.

And, in fact, sharing this gift doesn’t leave us with less; it leaves us with more.

Once we accept and experience the love of God, the next natural step is to share it, to let it overflow out and around us.

John addressed this process in 1 John 4:9–11: “**In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.**

**10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**

**11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another**.

God’s love comes to us and flows through us. The more we embrace and experience it, the more we share it with others.

What does that look like for you this season?

It could mean spending quality time with family. It could mean reconnecting with a friend who has drifted away.

It might mean serving neighbors or strangers or seeking out someone you suspect is lonely or hurting.

It might mean forgiving someone who has hurt you or apologizing to someone you have hurt.

There are endless ways to allow God’s love to flow through you as you love others as He has loved you.

Think of one way right now that you can share God’s love this week.

Then keep your heart and eyes open to the world around you as Christmas approaches.

Let’s keep our focus on making this a season of love that reaches far deeper than the sappy carols or even the romantic statistics.

Let’s revel in God’s love and be known to others by His love flowing out of us. May this be a season of accepting, experiencing, and sharing God’s gift of love in a new or deeper way.

**Prayer*:*** *God, thank You that in this season of Advent we can unwrap the gift of Your love. Help us to accept, experience, and share Your love with others this season. Please continue to fill us with expectation as we live in Your love and wait for the complete fulfillment of that love when Christ comes again.*

**Benediction:** “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17–19)