**Sermon Text**: 1 John 4:7-16

**Occasion**: Christmas Eve, 24 Dec 2022

**Sacrificial Christmas Love**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas time is a time of love. We witness love during the Christmas season when people generally get a little more kind and more generous with their compliments and gifts. Although our wallets and purses may be a little leaner this particular year due to a rise in prices across the board, we still want to show our love to our fellow human beings. But there are so many kinds of love. There is affection, compassion, romantic, platonic, etc., etc. So, what kind of love does God show to us at Christmas time? What kind of love defines Christmas? For this we need only turn to our second scripture reading for this evening from 1 John 4,

***9****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.*

At first, we might want to say that sending Christ into the world on Christmas Day is a love of presence—love defined by being near someone. But that is not quite the love spoken about in the Bible. Jesus Christ coming to be “pleased as Man with man to dwell as our Immanuel” is certainly part of the loveliness of the season but this is only the start of God’s love for us. The heart of God’s love is what Jesus Christ does for us, that is, the love of God is shown in the purpose behind Jesus coming into the world. It is not just about being together with the incarnate deity, that is, God in the flesh. The love of our Lord is fully seen when Jesus is made to be the propitiation for our sins.

Now, if you do not have an extensive knowledge of obscure English words, then odds are you don’t know what “propitiation” means. I bet most church-goers have no idea. Well, a propitiation is a sacrificial offering given for your forgiveness. This means the love of God which is made manifest to us is not as much concerned with loving us by being in our presence. The love of God is about sacrificing Himself for your salvation. God’s love is reconciling you back to Him for you were once lost in your sins. In truth, you were spiritually dead in your trespasses and your sins and were brought to life through the propitiation—the sacrifice—of Jesus Christ on the cross.

That is what the love of Christmas is all about: God sending His Son into the world that he might take your sins upon himself to forgive those sins and reconcile you back to God (2 Cor 5:21). In a word: the love of God is about sacrifice. And really, the root of all love is sacrifice. In order to love someone, you need to consider their needs before your own. You need to consider what makes others safe and content. In love, you give. You give of yourself so that the person you are loving may rest secure in your care for them. This is the type of love we truly see on Christmas morning.

Christ Jesus, being in the very form of God, did not count equality with God something that could be grasped by sinful flesh. Therefore, he made himself like us, except without sin. He made himself a servant to God and to man upon the earth that he might do what is necessary for our salvation. And Jesus was faithful to God and to mankind even to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Php 2:5-11) That faithfulness and love of Jesus was present all the way back on Christmas when he, the King of All Creation, made himself a small child—subject to dirty diapers, inexperienced parents, and the rank odours of a stable. Christ sacrificed being up in heaven to be down here upon earth with us, wading through the muck of sin and wickedness in the world. This is love, sacrificial love.

You may have heard the popular phrase, “All love is love,” but if that love is not rooted in sacrifice, then it is not exactly love. It might be a turn of phrase where you love this or that but it is certainly not the same love we are meant to have for other people. For example, you can say that you love Christmas cookies. I know I do. Yet, your love for Christmas cookies is not and should never be the same type of love for a human being. And I am not just talking about how love for cookies is rather superficial. I mean that you don’t care about a cookie’s feelings or make sure it stays safe or put its needs before your own. This love is not only superficial, your love for Christmas cookies is all about consumption. You eat a cookie. You destroy the cookie by eating it. You are not there for the cookie’s wellbeing or its benefit. Your love for cookies is purely selfish. You go to cookies to make yourself feel better—to give you pleasure at the cookie’s expense. Imagine if we treat people this way!

If your love for other people was all about consumption, then you would be using them for your pleasure at the cost of their wellbeing. As soon as they lose their use for you, you would throw them away. You would be demanding gifts and praise from them while giving nothing in return. You wouldn’t drive them to shows, appointments, or even the hospital unless there was some personal gain for you. If you applied this type of logic to a spouse, you would be divorcing them if they do not make you happy; completely reversing the love of the marital relationship which is about you supporting your spouse. And children? Children would be seen only as a burden because they are dependent on adults for their wellbeing. A consuming love would be abandoning the child as soon as they caused you frustration or cost you money, that is, a consuming love would abandon the child at the womb.

But true love, that is, sacrificial love is the giving of yourself for another. We see this in God because He is love (1 John 4:16). And I mean that. Love in its purest form is God Himself. He sets what love is supposed to be in this world and if there is anything that can be considered love in the world then it is something that resembles God. God is love itself. But it is not as though we have ourselves seen God face to face. We have not peered into the heavenly realms to analyze what makes love. So, we need God to show has what true love is like by loving us in the world. If God reveals true love, we can then observe it and know how we should be loving others. And God does this in sending us Jesus Christ on Christmas Day.

When we see Christ, we see God in the flesh. We see love in its purest form. We see someone who is ready to sacrifice his entire life for our benefit. It was never about what Jesus would have preferred to do. If it was then Jesus would never have come to earth in the first place. He never would have spent years explaining God and His word to people who constantly insulted and doubted him. If Christ did not have love, he never would have suffered insult and injury on the way to the cross. And if Christ did not have love, he definitely would not have sacrificed himself on the cross for us to forgive our sins and reconcile us back to our heavenly Father. All of Christ’s life was given in love—from his birth in the manger to his death on the cross to his resurrection from the dead and to his ascension into heaven. Jesus laid down his entire life for us for there is no greater love than the love that lay’s down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13). This is what Christ does for us.

We may not be able to see God with our own eyes. Even today we primarily see the Lord veiled with His Word and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. Yet in Christ and in his actions, we see our God in the flesh with us. We see one ready to sacrifice everything he is in order to give to us what we need: life lived in love. Not only do we need to receive Christ’s love, that is, not only do we need to receive his sacrifice for our forgiveness, we need him to direct our thoughts, words, and deeds so they mimic the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ himself. God is love so for us to live in God, we should be showing love to one another. We should be sacrificing ourselves for our neighbours’ wellbeing.

Now, in the theme of Christmas, maybe you might be thinking of your sacrificial love in the giving of presents—especially if those presents were expensive. But our loving sacrifice would be similar to the sacrifice that Christ underwent, a sacrifice of our lives—a willingness to suffer insult, injury, and need, for our neighbours’ benefit. And you might be thinking to yourself that this sounds odd. Why would you be suffering insults or injuries if you are helping your neighbours? Would they not be joyful that you are giving your lives to them? Well, yes, many good works in the name of Christ’s love are well received. You can give your time, talents, and treasures to support family and friends, but if you share God’s word with people, they might be a little reluctant. God’s word declares that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. People generally do not like to be called sinners. They do not want to admit to wrongdoing or wrong thinking. Yet, this is what we must do to care for them. We must speak to them in love by professing Christ’s love for them when he died for their sins at the cross, so they may be reconciled back to God through faith.

The season of Christmas is all about love and there is nothing lovelier than the message of Jesus Christ for us. God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son so that all those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). It is not that we have known love but that God has made love known among us through sacrifice (1 John 4:10). Christ has sacrificed himself for us, cleansing us from sin; and none of this could have come about without Christ coming on Christmas Day. Thanks be to God for this most loving gift. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.