**Sermon Text**: Philippians 1:2-11

**Occasion**: Second Sunday in Advent, 7 Dec 2024

**Loving with Discernment**

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

***9****And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,****10****so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ…* (Php 1)

Isn’t that a beautiful prayer? That the love we possess grow and abound beyond that we may love one another in the purity of Christ? We all want love, and why wouldn’t we want love in abundance? And when I say love, I mean a Christlike love, not some abstract emotion. Each and everyone of us wants love but every kind of love should be coming *from* someone.[[1]](#footnote-1) When you desire love, you desire someone to care for you and give out of the kindness of their heart. Your want for love is a want for someone else to be in your life. And when we think about love in the Christian Church, we are definitely talking about wanting Christ in our lives as well as Christ being in every loving relationship we have with one another. Because it is Christ who enlivens and purifies our loving relationships.

Just take our relationship to God our Father as an example. It was once terrible. As St Paul says elsewhere, we were once enemies of God (Rom 5:10) and hostile as we clung onto our sins (Col 2:21). God, in turn, was going to punish us for this and we stood condemned (John 3:18). But, this is why God chose to love us in Christ, so that we might receive His love and begin loving Him in return (1 Jn 4:10). Because Christ came into our lives, showing us the purest of loves at the cross, we are now able to love God. We are now able to be with God and in God through the love of Christ Jesus, and that is because love covers a multitude of sins—love forgives a multitude of sins (James 5:20). We see this in our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. And if you want to see how both work at the same time, we can use our gospel reading as an example (Luke 3:1-14).

John the Baptist proclaims that God’s wrath is coming for sinners. No one is to look to their parentage, their works, or to their memorization of Bible verses. Instead, bear the fruit of repentance. Turn unto your baptism and receive the forgiveness of sins that you have been promised there. That will repair your relationship with God, acting in His love. As He comes to you in His willingness to forgive, so you should turn to Him in response and have your sins forgiven. Those whom John baptizes do this, but they still have a question once forgiven, “What then shall we do?” Exactly. We’re forgiven, now what? We need structure and purpose beyond simply receiving grace. God created us for good works that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10). So, John the Baptist tells his hearers that they should act in love in keeping with the commandments of God. Share clothing and food with those who need it. Do not take more than what you are owed. Be content with what you have and treat people fairly.

John says all this because the love we have with God is not meant for our relationship with God alone. God’s love and forgiveness offered to us is meant to be shared to all people in our lives in all that we do. We should not act meanly, unfairly, or deceitfully. We should love others as ourselves—or, rather, we should love others like how Christ loves us. And this means acting in love in accordance with what God commands.

That is the prayer I read at the beginning of the sermon, *that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,**so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ*. Our love should not be tainted with sin, for it should be pure and blameless in Christ. That is, we need to act rightly. And our love should be offered with knowledge and discernment, not blindly and mindlessly. Now, on this point we might give pause, especially since so many people think that love is more emotional than enacted. So many people say, “All love is love,” which more or less means that anything you declare to be love must be something loving. But if we love without knowledge or discernment, where we ask ourselves if what we are doing is truly loving and helping the other person, we tread a dangerous path.

I’ll use a Christmas-themed example. You go out to various shops, restaurants, and performances for the season. People might say to you, “Happy Holidays.” Should you respond with the same, “Happy Holidays,” or do you reply, “Merry Christmas”? Now, people would say that you should reply with “Happy Holidays” because that is the more courteous thing to do—the more loving thing to do—since not everyone celebrates Christmas. But is it more loving? Not necessarily. Because we know those other holidays held around this time do not offer Christ nor his love which enlivens us unto eternal life. This is the very reason why we celebrate Christmas: because Christ has given us himself as a gift for the forgiveness of sins and our reconciliation with our heavenly Father. Now, of course, just saying “Merry Christmas” does not explicitly say our Gospel hope of being saved by grace through faith in Christ, nor are you going to start reciting the Creed right after saying, “Merry Christmas” but it might just give you an opportunity to love. If anyone asks you why you are replying to their “Happy Holidays” with your “Merry Christmas”, you now have the opportunity of sharing the loving gift of Christ.

What is more loving? To stay silent on matters of the faith or to proclaim the hope we have in Christ? If it were more loving to stay silent, then Christ would not have announced to the world that he would save us from our sins. He would have died and risen in obscurity off in a corner, not on full display in the heart of Israel. If silence were preferrable, then neither would Christ have told us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them everything he has taught us (Matt 28:18-20). It is always more loving to share the hope we have in Christ to people who need him.

Think about that when you have your get-togethers, dinners, and gift exchanges with family and friends. Deliberately think about how best to love them in this Christmas season. Use your knowledge of Christ’s salvation to discern that receiving the good news of Christ is always a loving thing to do. If you are meeting with Christians, repeat the hope they have in Christ and they will welcome you. “Merry Christmas, Christ has come for the forgiveness of our sins, may we live in him forever.” And if you are meeting with people who are not Christians or who say they believe but do not act out that belief, then tell them the hope we have in Christ. “Merry Christmas, Christ came on Christmas Day that we might have forgiveness and life in him.” The goal is never to start arguments but to share the hope that is in you with gentleness and love (1 Pt 3:15) This season is meant for the joy of worshipping Jesus. This should be present as we love one another in our celebrations, for there is no greater love we can share than the love of Christ.

The point I am trying to make is that we should love more and more abundantly with knowledge and discernment, not blindly and mindlessly. We cannot simply say that it is alright for someone to live without Christ, because that would mean they will face condemnation for their sins. Nor should we say to those who have once received forgiveness that it is alright that they act as if Christ were not with them. It is unloving to let sin reign where Christ should be.

This is what we have been discussing in the Wednesday evening Bible studies with regard to people in the LGBTQ+ Movement. We want all people to be in Christ. We want all people to know his love and life. But we also know that for someone to commit sexual acts outside of a marriage between one woman and one man breaks God’s command. That is the only institution God has created for the gift of sex to be enjoyed. That is true for all of us. If any us lust or have sex outside of a biblical marriage, that is sin and we need forgiveness. And because of our need for forgiveness, God has given us His only begotten Son so that His love may cover the multitude of our sins. We know we have sinned. We also know we are forgiven. But now we need to love with discernment so that all of us may be pure and blameless for the Day of Christ. We cannot say that sex outside of a biblical marriage, whether it be heterosexual adultery, homosexual acts, or whatever else, is not what it is. It is sin. But even though people desire sin, that does not mean we should not act in love. Our loving action should be to support and encourage people to chaste and honorable lives, helping them when they feel tempted, and listening when they need to talk. Because in each and every one of our relationships is Christ. As Christ loves this person, so you should love them.

The love of Christ means that we should strive for a loving relationship. That we not only acknowledge that we care for the person in front of us but that we demonstrate our care through our actions. That is how Christ loved us when he saw we needed to be reconciled to God the Father. He saw that he needed to come into our lives, sacrifice of himself, and continue to bless us with his Word. He speaks to us even now through the scriptures because he cares for us and he continues to hear our prayers because he wants us to tell him how we are doing. And through this relationship of faith and love, Christ has restored our place with God the Father. Wouldn’t that be a great thing for us to do when we talk to people? Wouldn’t it be great if we could speak in love with what is scriptural—what is godly—and listen to people when they reply, so that they may know the love of God? So, with whomever you meet, may you love and love more abundantly with discernment and with purity. For in this way, the love of Christ will remain with you and strengthen your relationships. Amen.

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

1. Self-love might be better described as self-respect or integrity since to love yourself like you love others (e.g. affection, devotion, sacrifice) leads into selfishness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)