

“UNEXPECTED LOVE”

John 15:12-17; Hosea 11:1-4

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God loves us as a mother loves her child. When Israel was just a child, fresh from the bonds of slavery in Egypt, still caught up in the old faith of Canaan, God taught them to walk, healed them from the wounds of oppression, and led them gently with love toward a new land, nurturing them and feeding them with the food of a new faith, on a path that promised a more complete community.

Every parent knows that many children do not respond with gratitude to this gentle leading, that some children even develop habits that are not healthy, one might even say defiant of the parent's good intentions. Israel was like this. There are stories from the wilderness wanderings, from the time of the judges, from the reigns of most kings, where they turned their backs on the God who brought them out of Egypt and persisted in the worship of other gods. In the eighth century BCE, the Assyrians were threatening their independence and if we were to read on in Hosea, we would see that God appears willing to abandon this gentle love for a tough love that might turn them back to the faith that God had patiently led them to.

I've chosen not to read about or talk about this tough love because we're in Advent. We're at the point in the year when we are making a new beginning, or more accurately, God is making a new beginning with us. In these verses from Hosea, God speaks of leading Israel with "bonds of compassion." The Hebrew words are connected to the same word that we translate as womb. This is an intimate portrait of God giving birth and taking pleasure in her relationship with Israel as an infant.

In a few days, we will look at another infant, who will inspire in us similar feelings of love. Jesus is not our child, but like all infants, he will be dependent on people to feed and shelter him. He will count on the faith community teaching him about God. As our opening introit says, "like a child... Jesus comes." And if, as Jesus will later teach, that we are to see in others whom we meet, the Christ, then we will be helped along in our faith, if we see children born into our world with the eyes of the God described in Hosea, if we can be as mothers who love their own children with the same depth and intensity.

It's not just a sentimental love, but a love that longs for the beloved to reach the benchmarks of a healthy life: learning to walk, healing from the usual obstacles thrown at every human being, being led by bonds of love, and sharing with one's neighbor the blessings that one has received. As we move toward Christmas and begin the new church year, we are called to remember the depth and breadth of the love that God has for us and the good that God desires for us.

So, on this Sunday when we emphasize love, I would urge us to take notice of the times we experience love, to offer a prayer of thanks for that love. There may be times in our

lives that call for “tough love,” but as we near the celebration of Jesus’ birth, know that God’s love is deep and broad, and gentle.

But as gentle as it is, it hopes for something. Love doesn’t want the child to remain a child. Love hopes for the child to grow into something, to mature, to take up the task of loving for themselves. The teacher may love the student, but looks forward to the day when the student can be a friend.

Jesus is nearing the time of his arrest and death when he has this intimate conversation with his disciples. The apprenticeship is over. They are familiar with the work that has to be done. He wants to set them free to do the work that he’s been doing.

This is what healthy love does. It offers support, reassurance, guidance and then it tells the child to go ahead, to do it. As often as not, it comes as a surprise. For a while the daughter has been insisting that she can do it all by herself, and then one day dad says, “okay, you do it,” and she sits there for just a second, maybe even asks if he’s sure. And the relationship begins to shift from parent to friend.

I love this stage that I’m in with my own daughters, this friendship where I can express curiosity about something and they look it up, because of course they’re faster with the technology. I love that they go on taking care of the details of their own lives, but feel free to call and ask about something they want to know or something they need. I love the birding outings where knowledge is shared and the eyes work together to spot the birds and identify them, increasing the pleasure for all of us. It’s a qualitatively different experience of love when the partners are pooling their knowledge instead of imparting knowledge. The latter comes with a tenderness, but the former introduces a mutuality that enhances the relationship.

When we look in the manger, the child inspires a certain kind of love that wants to protect the infant, and it’s beautiful, especially when we see the love that God has for us in the eyes of the infant. But when a person, whom we admire, and from whom we have learned many things and in whom we have discerned God’s love, invites us to participate in the work that brings healing, hope, and compassion to our world, it’s love of a different order. It’s unexpected, unexpected that we should be trusted so.

Friendship is a different kind of love. Christmas invites us into the journey of love, encouraging us to believe in God’s love for us, that God will watch over us, lead us with bonds of compassion, minister to us in our needs, and support us in the face of life’s challenges. But this infant will grow up, will show us the kind of love that acts, and then invites us to become friends, to be partners in the spreading of God’s love.

Love is about receiving and understanding God’s love for us... but it is also about giving back, about learning, about growing up into the kind of love that God shows us. Love is at the center of our faith, at the center of our lives. It’s where we come from and where we are headed. May you feel the depth of God’s love that makes the word become flesh, and may you experience the unexpected love, that is Christ in you, Jesus partnering with you in loving the world. Amen.