

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS LOVE LIKE AN OCEAN DECEMBER 20 2009
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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During Advent I have been preaching about the spiritual gifts that Jesus brings into our world.

When we light the advent candles we focus on spiritual gifts like HOPE, FAITH, JOY, and now today we focus on the gift of LOVE. Jesus brings love like an ocean deep and wide.

The birth stories about Jesus are found only in Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus from Mary's point of view- how an angel visited her and told her she would conceive and bear a son and how she visited her aunt Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist and how she and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the census when Jesus was born there. It is all from Mary's point of view.

However, the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus from Joseph's point of view. Matthew tells us how an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him that the child conceived in Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit and that when the baby was born, he should name him Jesus. Matthew also adds that his birth is to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son who would be called EMMANUEL which means "God is with us."

Matthew 1:18-25: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM EMMANUEL WHICH MEANS "GOD IS WITH US."

Prayer

Did you know that the Pacific Ocean is so large that all of the land mass of the earth could be placed in it with hundreds of miles of ocean left over?

The Pacific Ocean is 60 million square miles of ocean and stretches from the North Pole to the South Pole and from Los Angeles, California to Sidney, Australia which is 7,500 miles.

The Pacific Ocean is also the deepest ocean in the world with an average depth of 3 miles and the deepest part is about 7 miles down. At 7 miles deep, the water is almost freezing and it is pitch dark.

I think that it would be fair to say that the Pacific Ocean is deep and it is wide.

When people have tried to describe the love of God that comes in Jesus they have often used the ocean as an analogy. Just as the Pacific Ocean is deep and wide, so Christians believe the love of God for all humanity is deep and wide.

I cannot fathom the depth and width of the Pacific Ocean just as I can hardly fathom the depth and width of God's love for all humanity that comes to us in Jesus Christ.

When I was growing up and went to church camp, we sang a song with these words:
DEEP AND WIDE, DEEP AND WIDE, THERE'S A FOUNTAIN FLOWING DEEP AND WIDE.

It is a song that tells us that the love of God for all of us is like the ocean- deep and wide.

When Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus, he tells us that God sent Jesus into the world to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah who said a virgin or young woman would conceive and bear a son and he would be called Emmanuel. His name is Jesus but his title is Emmanuel.

In Hebrew the letters E. L. at the end of Emmanuel stand for Eloheim which is the Hebrew word for God. The Hebrew letters "emmanu" mean "with us." So literally the word Emmanuel means "THE WITH US GOD."

Jesus was called Emmanuel because he is the "with us God" as opposed to a God who is far away from us. Jesus is the God who is always with us.

One of the most significant ways that someone can demonstrate that they love us is to be with us in all the circumstances of life. Someone who loves you is someone who is with you and doesn't abandon you under any circumstances. That is one of the ways we demonstrate our love for someone- we are with them in all circumstances of life.

Jesus is the "with us God" the one who is with us in the good times and in the bad times of life. Jesus is the one whose love for us is deeper and wider than we can possibly imagine and is with us all the time.

To say that God's love is deep means that God loves each one of us deeply and personally and to say that God's love is wide means that God's love stretches to include all of humanity.

The parents, who have their babies baptized this morning, demonstrate what it means to love a person deeply.

When parents hand me their baby for baptism, I look into the parents' eyes and I only see love. They love this specific baby deeply and personally. I don't try to explain why it is that parents love their new-born babies so deeply but I certainly recognize that it is true.

It is the way I felt when I first held each of our children or grandchildren. The first time I held each of the new- born babies in our family, I was overcome with feelings of love, wonder, joy and gratitude. I loved each one deeply and I suspect you had the same feeling when you held your new born baby in your arms.

I like to imagine that is the same way God feels about each one of us. God hold us in God's arms, looks into each of our faces and God is overwhelmed with feelings of love and joy because God loves each of

us deeply. I like to think that when God holds us in his arms he thinks: I DID IT AGAIN. I BROUGHT ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL BABY INTO THIS WORLD AND I LOVE THEM DEEPLY.

The love of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ for each of us is deeper than the deepest sea and deeper than we can possibly imagine.

Last week a teacher sent me a story about something that happened at the school where she teaches.

She explained that there is family where both of the parents have lost their jobs and their home and they are now homeless and raising four boys. They live with one relative or friend for awhile then they stay at a shelter until they have to leave to live with someone else. They are moving from one place to another every few weeks. The only consistent place in the lives of their boys is the school they attend and the parents make sure that their kids get to school every day regardless of where they may be living.

The teacher explained that the boys all stay after school for tutoring. A couple of weeks ago, when it got down to 17 degrees with a strong cold wind, she discovered that the father of the boys had walked three miles from the shelter where they were staying to pick up his sons after school.

When he came into the school it was obvious that he was freezing cold. He just had a lightweight jacket on and he was anxious to get inside the warm school building. He warmed up for a few minutes and then he gathered up his young sons who had on light weight jackets themselves and prepared to walk with them three miles back to the shelter.

When the teacher realized they were about to leave the school and walk three miles in the cold, she asked them to wait for a few minutes. She went back to her room, took some money out of her purse and gave it to the dad so he could buy bus tickets to get his sons back to the shelter without walking in that cold biting wind.

She said when she gave him the money, tears welled up in his eyes and he gave her a hug as he said, "Thank you, thank you," and took his boys down to the bus stop so they could ride to the shelter on a warm bus.

I thank God for a generous teacher who gives personally to help families in need in her school every day and I also thank God for a father that loves his boys so much that he would walk three miles on a cold windy day to walk with his sons on their journey home. This is a father who loves his children deeply. He didn't want his sons to walk home alone in the cold; he came to walk with them.

In a similar way our heavenly father didn't just send us into this world to walk through this life alone. God came in Jesus Christ to walk with us during the cold hard times of life and during the warm sunny days of life.

Jesus represents the "with us God" who loves us so deeply he walks with each of us through our whole life journey.

No matter what you are facing this Christmas, I hope you can imagine that you don't face it alone. Jesus, the "with us God", is right beside you walking with you every step of the way.

Recently, I encountered another example of someone who loved deeply.

Mitch Albom, the author of *TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE* has written another book entitled *HAVE A LITTLE FAITH*.

Rabbi Albert Lewis was Mitch's rabbi from the time he was a little boy in New Jersey. Mitch had grown up and moved to Detroit where he is a newspaper reporter and author. On High Holy Days he would return to his hometown synagogue in New Jersey to visit his parents and hear his Rabbi's message.

On one occasion, the 82 year old Rabbi Lewis asked Mitch if he would give the eulogy at the Rabbi's funeral service whenever that time came. Mitch thought he should get to know the Rabbi better so he visited him regularly for the next 8 years until Rabbi Lewis passed away and during that time rediscovered what it means to have faith and trust in God.

Rabbi Lewis had been the rabbi of the same congregation for over 40 years and built it from a small struggling congregation to a large suburban congregation through his deep compassion and love for not only his Jewish members but for anyone in need in the community. When a person with no particular faith background was in the local hospital and facing death and wanted to talk to a spiritual leader, the nurses would call the compassionate Rabbi who would share God's love with anyone in need.

When Rabbi Lewis came to retire from the ministry of his congregation, Mitch was there for his final sermon and was shocked at what he heard.

Rabbi Lewis could have looked back over the past 40 plus years in that parish and remembered all the good things he had done to help the parish grow and to serve people in the community. But that is not what he did. In his final message to the congregation, Rabbi Lewis asked forgiveness from his flock.

He asked forgiveness for not being better able to ease the pain of parents who had lost a child. He asked forgiveness for not being able to save more troubled marriages. He asked forgiveness for not having the resources to help widows and families in economic crisis. He asked forgiveness for not succeeding in helping more teenagers through the struggles of the teenage years. He asked forgiveness for not being of more comfort to people during their last days of life.

During the last sermon of his ministry, Rabbi Lewis asked forgiveness from his congregation for not being able to help them more with their personal challenges during their times of crisis and need. He could have boasted about his accomplishments but instead he recognized his shortcomings and sought their forgiveness.

It occurred to me that Rabbi Lewis loved his people so deeply and felt their pain so completely that all he could think about when it came time to leave them as their Rabbi was his regret that he had not helped them more during the difficult times in their lives. It is clear to me that Rabbi Lewis was a Rabbi who loved the people of his flock deeply.

As I read this book, I thought about another Rabbi who loved people deeply and felt their pain personally. I thought about Jesus of Nazareth who was also called Rabbi during his lifetime here on earth and loved people so deeply that he gave his own life for them.

Rabbi Jesus, our Lord and Savior, loves each us more deeply than we can imagine and rejoices when we rejoice and weeps with us when we weep.

At Christmas we remember that the love of Jesus for each of us is deep and personal for each of us.

We also remember that the love of Jesus for all of us is also wide. His love encompasses every person on earth.

In his book, *HAVE A LITTLE FAITH*, Mitch Albom also tells about his journey with an African American pastor named Rev. HENRY COVINGTON who serves an inner city congregation in one of the poorest and most crime ridden neighborhoods of Detroit.

Mitch tells about how Henry Covington was a drug dealer early in his life and how he spent seven years in prison for dealing drugs. When he got out of jail he went back to dealing drugs and on one occasion he was about to be killed by other drug dealers from whom he had stolen drugs and money. In that life and death situation, Henry prayed to God for the first time in years and asked God to save him from almost certain death.

When he was not found and killed by the drug dealers who were looking for him, Henry took it to mean that God had saved his life for a purpose. Henry and his wife got off drugs and they and their children started attending church and studying the Bible.

Eventually, Henry was called into the ministry and to minister to the poorest of the poor and to people who were addicted to drugs. He went into the inner city of Detroit and started driving around the poorest neighborhoods and putting food on the hood of his car and giving food to hungry people on the streets and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ that they were loved and precious to God no matter how far they had strayed.

Eventually, Henry got a big old abandoned church building where he had services for about 40 very poor, homeless, often drug addicted people and served them meals and gave them a place to sleep.

Henry worked other jobs to make money to keep the church going to provide hope, food and shelter to people that everyone else had given up on. The people of the church didn't provide for Henry and his family- he and his family worked to provide for the people of the congregation.

He named his congregation "I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER" and believed that God sent him to care for anyone who came to him. His job was to love and care for everyone regardless of whether they were homeless and poor, or were drug addicts or prostitutes.

Mitch interviewed some of the people in that congregation for his book.

He tells about Dan, one of the few white members of the church. Dan was a homeless alcoholic who drank cheap liquor until he passed out every day. One cold day in the winter he came to the church and needed a place to stay so Henry took him in and after 30 days of living in the church and talking to Henry and accepting Christ into his life he became sober and now helps other alcoholics achieve sobriety.

Henry also invited kids on the street to come to his house for Friday and Saturday nights rather than being on the streets and getting in trouble. Sometimes he had 20 or 30 kids at his house every Friday and Saturday night eating and playing games and sometimes staying overnight if they didn't have any place else to sleep.

Through Mitch Albom's stories in the newspaper, people in the neighborhood and throughout the community began to hear about Henry's compassion and outreach to everyone in need regardless of their situation and started bringing food and funds and clothing to the church so Henry could provide food, clothing and shelter and the Good News of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ for people in need.

When Henry was asked why he gave himself so unselfishly to caring for homeless and hungry people he told them that God saved him when he didn't deserve it and he wanted God to use him to help bring hope to other hopeless people.

When I read the story of Henry, I realized that he is a model of the wideness of God's love. The I Am My Brother's Keeper ministry shows us that we are responsible to care for all of the human family and to share God's Good News with everyone regardless of their circumstances.

God's love for us is like the ocean- deep and personal for each of us individually and wide and comprehensive for all people.

The only question we need to think about during this Christmas season is this: Do we love like God loves? Do we love others deeply and personally? Is our love wide and comprehensive and includes everyone?

I want you to remember this message by remembering the words of that old camp song. Join me in these actions:

DEEP AND WIDE; DEEP AND WIDE; THERE'S A FOUNTAIN OF GOD'S LOVE FLOWING DEEP AND WIDE.

Join me in singing *I'VE GOT LOVE LIKE AN OCEAN* which means we have a love which is both deep and wide.

Let us pray.