

LOVE
Luke 1:26-38
Colebrook Congregational Church
4th Sunday of Advent 2014

Last Sunday, Theresa texted me about a church she attended with a family friend. She was very confused and overwhelmed and more than a little irate. She described a massive complex, with a huge amount of people, a “sanctuary” that was more an auditorium, and a preacher that was like a performer. I replied, “That's a mega-church,” and told her a bit more about them, and how most of my classmates and I felt about them. These places are in fact designed to feel more like a theater or performance. You have probably seen some televangelists at some point. I am usually wary of them, except Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral, and my Mom assures me that Joel Osteen is a good one as well. Anyway, if you see where they are broadcasting from, it is usually from inside a mega-church, with auditorium seating and huge projector screens. There is one thing about those types of places that I do like, though, especially because of today's selection. They have the ability to show or project images to go along with the parts of the service. Now, today's selection in the Gospel of Luke comes from verses just prior to the verses from last Sunday. It is called the Annunciation, and it has been a popular subject for artists. So, I had the thought that it would be nice to pop up an image of Botticelli's Annunciation up on the wall here.

But back to the selection. Luke has packed a lot of theological implications into those first two verses. First, Jesus is from Nazareth, so he is called a Nazarene, which sounds very close to Nazirite, a consecrated & holy person, like John the Baptist and Samson. Then Luke makes sure to mention that Mary is a virgin, which combined with the activity of the Holy Spirit, emphasizes the divine aspect of Jesus, which is essential to Jesus' sacrifice. Next comes Joseph, of the House of David, a royal house, from which the Messiah is prophesized to come from. It is like a foundation is being built, to help the listener understand the importance of Jesus and his ministry.

The selection continues to describe the Archangel Gabriel's interaction with Mary, how she is being favored by God to carry the Son of the Most High, who will assume the throne of David, and will rule over the house of Jacob forever. Jacob was the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, and the father of

twelve sons from which the Twelve Tribes of Israel originate from. And Jacob is later renamed Israel, and that is how God's chosen people got their name. So Gabriel is telling Mary that her son Jesus will rule over God's faithful people. And the throne of David is important, because while David was not the first king of Israel, he was God's favorite, he was the most powerful of all the kings of Israel, unifying the Tribes, and God made a promise to David, that the Messiah would be descended from him.

The theme for this final Sunday of Advent is Love, and while this selection is not explicitly about love, it is the announcement of an act of God's Love for us, the giving of Jesus, the Messiah, to us.

I cannot talk about love without talking about Jonathan Edwards, who proposed a theology based on love. In his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, he described the events of the Great Awakening and noted twelve signs of a true Christian. The twelfth sign was the most important: Love. Christians are known by their outward displays of love. This is the principal sign, he said, by which Christians are to judge their own sincerity. A direct quote from him, “Godliness in the heart has direct a relation to practice, as a fountain to a stream, or as the luminous nature of the sun has to beams sent forth, or as life has to breathing.”

Love, and its outward expressions, were so important to Edwards, it informed every aspect of his theology. If someone is truly faithful to Jesus, they will feel moved to express this love through actions that benefit others, rather than just themselves. The purest form of this, is when it is done without the hope or expectation of reward. His students called this “disinterested benevolence,” and it had led to the creation of many benevolence societies throughout New England.

I personally consider this a form of Congregational Spirituality. Different traditions practice different kinds of spirituality, where the participant interacts with the Divine in some way. Some handle snakes and speak in tongues, some pray the rosary or a labyrinth, some follow monastic orders and asceticism, and some meditate. Many of these are associated with specific traditions. Jesus tells us that whenever we do something for

someone, we are doing that thing to Him as well, so I feel that when we practice the outwards acts of love, moved to do so because of our faith in Jesus, we are serving not only our neighbor, but Jesus as well. We interact with the Divine in the act of benevolence.

Jesus also intrusts us to be modest, that we mustn't brag or pray loudly for others to hear, so it is difficult for me to share illustrations of this kind from my life and I have struggled with that all week, hoping to find an other illustration to share. My mind kept returning a story called, The Giving Tree...and I kept replying NO!!! I recognize that it is a very good way to illustrate this, allegorically, but the story by itself makes me very cross with one of the characters.

The story is about a tree and a boy. The boy is hungry, so the tree gave him an apple. When the boy wanted to make money, the tree offered her apples to sell. He wanted a house, the tree gave him her branches. He wanted a boat to sail away, she gave him her trunk. He came back to her, now a stump, and she said that she has nothing left to give him, except a place to sit and rest.

When I first heard this story, I was very upset with the boy. I felt he was selfish, greedy, and ungrateful. Then the camp chaplain explained it allegorically. Humanity is the boy, and God is the tree, and it is describing God's unlimited love for us. While I see that, and understand that, I still dislike that boy, and I hope that I have shown gratitude whenever someone has done something for me.

I have wondered how Jonathan Edwards would have responded to this story with such an extreme imbalance, but I cannot even guess. There are ways to Love our fellow humans without giving as much as that tree did, and can still be done in ways big or small.

This past summer, I was filling in at Berkshire Community Church, when I noticed I had a slow leak in one of my tires. I was in the middle of nowhere looking for a service station, and when I stopped to ask a man tending his hedges for directions, he happened to have an air compressor and fixed my tire and sent me on my way home! There is the food and winter clothing

drive we are doing here. I know that some of you are providing gifts for children in need through some other benevolence group. There are the true Secret Santas we hear about in the news every Christmas, who hear about people in need and anonymously provide for them. And also the random person encountered as we go on our way, who could benefit from a little consideration. These and more are all ways that we can share love with one another, especially the best kind that we can, the one expressed without thought of reward for oneself!

We are about to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the embodiment of God's love for us. How should we respond? I say with Love for our world and all in it. When we express our love for others through benevolent actions, we are doing so for Jesus, and that is an ideal response to God's Love. We should certainly respond better than that boy in The Giving Tree. By responding with LOVE.