Decided to Love
A sermon by David Reed December 17, 2006
For the CrossRoads Christian Fellowship

This week we come to the third of the four stops on our journey of advent. This week we focus on God's love made flesh and bone in Jesus. Interestingly, in thousands and thousands of churches all over the world – millions of followers of Jesus and countless people searching for God will be considering the same. It may be the most important stop of advent simply because in God's love we find our hope, Joy, our Peace, and our Savior. Today the church is focused on this great love that sent a Son to die and purchase us back from the spiritual death sin brings to our souls. Truly, it must be a powerful day on the earth- perhaps one of the moments in our time when it is on earth as it is in heaven.

Christmas is a deeply joyous and meaningful time for me. However, there is a side to this holiday that for some, it is very difficult. For in as much as we celebrate God's amazing love for us – love is intrinsically tied to life experience that has for some, left scars on hearts, minds and souls. It is not coincidence or mistake that in coming face to face with God's love we come face to face with our struggles, grief, anger, fears, deepest loss and all that might harden our hearts to God's true and pure love. God intended his love to be encompassing…<u>it must be for it seeks to transform our experiences into his glory.</u>

Finally, it is a difficult thing to merely talk about Love. Love is experiential by nature. It means little to talk or listen to words of Love if not accompanied by experience and action. Love must be more than thought. It follows then that love must also be more than feeling and emotion. Our feelings and emotions are fleeting, changing and unstable<u>. If we base our understanding of love on emotion we will never truly love or experience the deepest love of God.</u> God's love reflects the highest commitment backed by the most costly act seen most clearly as his love became human in the Baby Jesus and was nailed to the cross for each of us even before we knew him.

With this in mind it is my hope that we will all come away today having seen, understood, and experienced God's love and go out desiring to share such love in our world.

<u>Seeing God's love</u>

Romans 5:1-6,8,10 Since we have been made right with God by our faith, we have peace with God. This happened through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought us into that blessing of God's grace that we now enjoy. And we are happy because of the hope we have of sharing God's glory. We also have joy with our troubles, because we know that these troubles produce patience. And patience produces character, and character produces hope. And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out his love to fill our hearts. He gave us his love through the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us…When we were unable to help ourselves, at the moment of our need, Christ died for us, although we were living against God…But God shows his great love for us in this way: Christ died for us while we were still sinners. While we were God's enemies, he made friends with us through the death of his Son. Surely, now that we are his friends, he will save us through his Son's life.

What would you do?

At a fundraising dinner for a school that serves learning disabled children, the father of one of the students delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended.

After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he offered a question: "When not interfered with by outside influences, everything nature does is done with perfection. Yet my son, Shay, cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is the natural order of things in my son?" The audience was stilled by the query. The father continued. "I believe, that when a child like Shay

comes into the world, an opportunity to realize true human nature presents itself, and it comes, in the way other people treat that child."

Then he told the following story: Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shay's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team, but the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play, it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance and, getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning."

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the outfield. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat.

At this juncture, do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball. However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher.

The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and turned and threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling, "Shay, run to first! Run to first!" Never in his life had Shay ever made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" By the time Shay rounded first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions and intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head.

Shay ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home.

Shay reached second base, the shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third!" As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams were screaming, "Shay, run home!" Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world."

Shay’s story is ours. We had no chance before God. Sin had destroyed the relationship God intended for us. Psalm 130:3 tells us that if God had counted our sins against us who could stand. On the day God sent Jesus

to the earth God sent true love for all people of all time to see. Jesus saw to it we are welcomed on the heavenly team…and saw to it that we can run through this life to score an eternal home run. As with Shay, it is a gift of pure love. Like the players on both teams we are given the chance to live this gift of pure love forward that others might understand and know it too.

Know God's Love:

Philippians 1:9-11. And this is my prayer: That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Here we are reminded that true love, while it is an emotional experience is based on knowledge and understanding. God's love is always connected with action and always glorifies God – we must know how to act in order that Christ in us be lifted high.

C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote,

"Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. There are many things below it, but there are also things above it. You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all....In fact, the state of being in love usually does not last....But of course ceasing to be (feel) 'in love' need not mean ceasing to love*. Love...is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by the grace which both partners ask and receive from God"*....We must understand the love God pours out to fill our hearts by giving us his Spirit is not our human love…it is his love.

Ray VanderLann, wrote and article – "Wine For The Bride, His Body His Blood" for Focus on the Family Magazine. In it he said:

In the first century, when a young Jewish man reached marrying age and his family selected an appropriate wife for him, the young man and his father would meet the young woman and her father to negotiate the "bride price", the figurative cost of replacing a daughter. The price was usually very high.

With negotiations complete, the custom was for the young man's father to pour a cup of wine and hand it to his son. His son would turn to the young woman, lift the cup and hold it out to her, saying, "This cup is a new covenant in my blood, which I offer to you." In other words, "I love you, and I'll give you my life. Will you marry me?"

The young woman had a choice. She could take the cup and return it and say no. Or she could answer without saying a word --- by drinking the cup, her way of saying, "I accept your offer, and I give you my life in response."

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and His disciples sat together celebrating Passover. The disciples knew the liturgy very well, they had celebrated Passover all their lives. When it came time to drink the third cup of wine, the cup of redemption, Jesus lifted the cup as the disciples would expect and offered traditional Seder thanks, which are used to this day, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for giving us the fruit of the vine." And then He offered it to them but said something they probably did not expect: "This cup is a new covenant which I offer to you."

There are many meanings to that statement, but one of them, in common, ordinary language, was, "I love you, and the only way I know to show the power of my love is to offer you myself - one life is given to and for the other."

It is hard to know what those disciples thought that night. Maybe a few chuckled a bit at the picture of Jesus making a marriage proposal, which must have seemed totally out of place in a Passover Seder. And yet, in that poignant moment they may have understood, it may have sunk in why Jesus was willing to leave heaven and come to earth. And it all came together for them later why he ultimately died on the cross, was buried and rose again – to offer hope and a new relationship with God through himself - for all who would believe in and follow him; all this to say, *"I love you, and as my Father promised your fathers, I'll pay the price for you."*

We normally associate these images and words with communion yet I find I cannot separate Jesus' arrival from his death and resurrection. Whenever Christians celebrate Christmas, we are made mindful of The Father's love gift. In Jesus He still says, "I love you." He still says, "I offer you life in my Son". And He still asks "Will you believe, will you accept my love? He holds out the cup of love and waits to hear in response "Yes, I accept your love, and I give you my life; my heart, my mind, and my strength." As we grow in the knowledge of Christ, we grow to know God. We grow in the knowledge of Christ by reading, prayer, fellowship, and serving others. To know this love is not based on emotion but decision, commitment, and discipline of heart, mind, strength and soul…it is being DECIDED TO LOVE.

Living God's Love

We find in Christ we enter into a circle of love.

- God showed us his love in Christ.
- Christ taught of God's love so we might know and understand God
- God invited us to participate in his work of love by loving others so that they might see God's love

2 Corinthians 5:16-20 From this time on we do not think of anyone as the world does. In the past we thought of Christ as the world thinks, but we no longer think of him in that way. If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone; everything is made new! All this is from God. Through Christ, God made peace between us and himself, and God gave us the work of telling everyone about the peace we can have with him. God was in Christ, making peace between the world and himself. In Christ, God did not hold the world guilty of its sins. And he gave us this message of peace. So we have been sent to speak for Christ. It is as if God is calling to you through us. We speak for Christ when we beg you to be at peace with God. Christ had no sin, but God made him become sin so that in Christ we could become right with God.

1 John 4 14-21 We have seen and can testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God has God living inside, and that person lives in God. And so we know the love that God has for us, and we trust that love. God is love. Those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

This is how love is made perfect in us: that we can be without fear on the day God judges us, because in this world we are like him. Where God's love is, there is no fear, because God's perfect love drives out fear. It is punishment that makes a person fear, so love is not made perfect in the person who fears. We love because God first loved us. If people say, "I love God," but hate their brothers or sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen. And God gave us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.

In his book *Mere Christianity,* C. S. Lewis wrote,
"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently

come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

The Importance of Love

Love is a transitive reality—that is, it requires an object. In the Bible, love is described as personal (between persons) and selfless (desiring the best for others). Christians see God's love in sending his Son to die on the cross to save sinners (Rom. 5:8; John 3:16; 1 John 4:10). Christians are to be known by the fact that they love God and others (John (13:34-35). Their love is not to be like the love the world has (Luke 6:32, 35). Love is best seen in actions and in most cases is to be identified with what we do—in our compassion and commitment to those around us, regardless of the object's virtue (1 John 4:19). Our loving attitudes and behavior are to reflect God's love. Jesus said that only two commands are needed to govern our lives: love of God and love of neighbor. If such love is demonstrated, all the law and prophets are fulfilled.

The Shaw Pocket Bible Handbook, Walter A. Elwell, Editor, (Harold Shaw Publ., Wheaton , IL; 1984), p. 353

There is the story of a Chinese farmer who was a Christian. He farmed the side of a hill along with a few other farmers. One of the most difficult tasks that the farmer had was to irrigate his crop. He had to carry water from a lake below the hill up to his land. The farmer who owned the land below the Christian farmer was not a Christian. He made life for the Christian almost unbearable, because whenever the Christian farmer irrigated his land the non-Christian would knock down the dam separating their land and the water would flow down and irrigate his land. The Christian farmer, wanting to be a good Christian, would swallow his anger and not say anything. As time went on, however, and the behavior of the non-Christian farmer didn't change the Christian began to harbor hard feelings and hatred began to grow in him.

The Christian thought that the solution to the problem was in his neighbor becoming a Christian also, but the neighbor was unresponsive to the Christian's words. While praying about the situation God spoke to the Christian, convicted him of his hatred and showed him how he was to love his neighbor. Next time the Christian farmer irrigated his land, he first went and knocked down the damn between his and the other farmer's property. He then proceeded to water both properties. He did this for several weeks until the non-Christian farmer came to him and shared with the Christian that he was giving his life to Christ because he could no longer stand against a God who could inspire such love in a man.

As yet another Christmas approaches
May we see God's pure and true love at work
May we know such love deep within our Hearts, minds, and souls
May it become the defining source of our strength, our actions, so that
others might see and know God's love for them as well.