

Welcome the Seasons

Days of Love

1 John 4:7-17

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(Note: This sermon is from the Dec. 12 online worship service.)

Pause for a moment and bring your attention to your breathing. We breathe all day and all night without even thinking about it, and yet without it...well, bad things happen.

Now, in a moment I'm going to ask you to take a deep inhale. You'll know you're inhaling deeply when your belly expands and not just your chest. OK, ready? Inhale deeply and hold it...now inhale a little more...and now just a little more...and now just a little more. By now you should be turning blue and your eyes should be bulging, so now slowly exhale...a little more...a little more...just a little more, keep going. Well done!

You're probably wondering what that was all about, so let me tell you. Breathing is essential to living, but breathing only works if there's a balance between inhaling and exhaling. It can't be just one or the other. We need both. In addition, you probably noticed that you can only take in so much air, and you can only exhale so much air. Our life literally depends upon the balance and rhythm of inhaling and exhaling.

And I want to suggest to you that that very same thing holds true when it comes to love. Love is also essential to life. We were created in love and created for love. But there's an important rhythm to love that's worth tending to, and there's no better season to tend to that rhythm than Advent. To dive more deeply into that, let's read these words from 1 John 4:7-17:

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Just as an infant's first breath begins with an inhale, the rhythm of love begins by receiving. I think that's what John is getting at when he writes, *"This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."* Our faith doesn't begin with the command to love our neighbor, or even to love God. It begins with the proclamation that we are loved by God. No qualifications necessary. No conditions. God chooses to love us, and that love was embodied in Jesus.

The longer I live, the more convinced I've become that the real power of believing that God loves you completely and unconditionally is that it empowers us to learn to love ourselves. I don't know about you, but I find it far more difficult to love myself than I do to love other people. I say harsh and critical things to myself that I would never say to another human being. I see so many of my own faults and failures, but I tend to overlook or forget those of others. I'm quicker to forgive others than I am to forgive myself. But when we entrust ourselves to the unfathomable depths of God's love for us, we can dare to believe that we are lovable and worthy despite our failures and shortcomings.

We could think about it this way. Here's a crisp, new ten dollar bill. It's worth...you got it...ten dollars! But how about if I crumple it up like this. How much is it worth now? Yep, still ten dollars. But how about if I stomp on it a few times and get it good and dirty? How much is it worth now? Yep, still worth ten dollars. In the same way, it doesn't matter how crumpled you are by the challenges of life, or how stained you are by

your faults and failures. You are still of infinite worth to God, because God chooses to love you.

Reminds me of a sign I once saw (<https://ifunny.co/picture/lost-dog-3-legs-blind-in-one-eye-missing-right-ax87gXIX6>) Lost dog: 3 legs, blind in one eye, missing right ear, tail broken, recently castrated... answers to the name of "Lucky." I love that! Someone loves Lucky, loves him enough to look for him when he's lost. It doesn't matter that Lucky isn't exactly perfect. Love sees beyond the imperfections. And the Gospel proclaims that that is true of our relationship with God. God's love sees beyond our faults and our failures, and then invites us to love ourselves in the same way.

The rhythm of love begins when we inhale the sweetness of God's unconditional love for us and learn to love ourselves. And then that rhythm continues when we exhale that love into the lives of others. Today's Scripture reading put it this way: *"...let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."* Having inhaled God's love into our lives, we then exhale it into the lives of others. If we have nothing to exhale, it's probably because we haven't inhaled. I think that's what John means when he says, *"...anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."* Do you see the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling in John's words?

Now, let's be clear. Knowing God's love for us doesn't mean we suddenly like everyone. It doesn't mean that we'll have the "warm fuzzies" for Uncle Joe who has no filter and is bound to loudly espouse his political views around the Christmas dinner table. It doesn't mean that we suddenly feel compelled to send flowers to the neighbor who, when he snow-blows his driveway blows it all onto your driveway. Though I admit, Christmas miracles do happen! No, the love that John is talking about here has little to do with how we feel about people, and more to do with how we choose to see them and respond to them. Loving others means seeing them through the lens of grace, knowing that they, like us, are both saint and sinner. It means putting the best construction on their words and actions, and not assuming the worst. It means using our words to build them up and affirm them, rather than gossiping about them. It means forgiving when we've been wounded. It means compassionately serving people's needs to the full extent of our ability.

A couple of months ago we did a screening here at Prince of Peace of a documentary called "Love Them

First." It's the story of Lucy Laney Elementary School in North Minneapolis, and how the staff of that school consistently loves kids, many of whom are facing life-challenges I can't imagine in my worst nightmares. And the inspiration that fuels that school is their principal, a woman named Maurie. Her capacity to love these challenging children is stunning, and as the documentary makes clear, that capacity to exhale love comes from her faithful practice of inhaling God's love for her. If you're not sure what love looks like, I would urge you to watch the documentary, which streams for free on Amazon Prime.

And I think it's important to note that Maurie's love for these kids is tough. It has grit and it has appropriate boundaries. Our love also needs to have appropriate boundaries and healthy limits. It doesn't compel us to stay in toxic or abusive relationships. That would show a lack of love for ourselves.

So, let me land this plane. As we move into the Christmas holidays, we will likely encounter people that we struggle to love. Perhaps they rub us the wrong way, or maybe they've wounded us somehow. Can you think of someone like that in your life? In the weeks ahead, when you find yourself struggling to exhale love into their lives, don't give up and don't shame yourself. Instead, pause and inhale. Hold tightly to the promise of the Gospel, that you are "Lucky," both flawed and deeply loved. Doing that doesn't mean loving others will be easy, but here's the promise in today's scripture reading, *"God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect."* Let's pray.