

"THE GOD OF LOVE"
December 9, 1990

TEXT: 1 John 4:16 "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."

I do not know what you were thinking about this morning as you watched that Kindergarten Christmas pageant. But I found myself thinking back to my own Sunday School days. I do not think I was ever in any pageant, but we did recite a fair amount of memory verses. And I can still remember some of them.

As you might guess, most of them were short and fairly simple, but we would stand up and recite with great enthusiasm. And I still have a special place in my heart for verses like Psalm 122:1: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." Or Psalm 100:1: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands." Or Psalm 118:24: "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."

But the very first verse I learned, and in many ways the most important, came from this morning's scripture lesson: "God is love." As a matter of fact, if you listened carefully, you heard it, not just once, but twice, the only two places you will find it in the whole Bible. They are I John 4:8 ("He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.") and I John 4:16 ("... God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.")

During this Advent season, as we think about the God who was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, a great many words and concepts come to mind. We think, for instance, of words like "hope", and "joy", and "peace." But, most of all, I think of love. For "... God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."

Now all that sounds very nice, to be sure, but what in the world does it mean? What do we mean by love? And what do we mean when we say that God is Love? The best answer I can give is found in these familiar words from First Corinthians, chapter thirteen:

"Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

And the "Good News" is that this is the kind of love God has for us. No wonder this morning's scripture says, "there is no

fear in love." God's perfect love casts out fear. God's perfect love is a love we can count on.

The kind of love that depends on feelings can fluctuate. It sometimes changes with the season, or the phases of the moon, or for no apparent reason whatsoever. Even the kind of love that leads to marriage is often far from stable. In more than thirty years of ministry, I do not think I ever married a couple that did not at least think they were in love. And I have no reason to believe they were not. Yet almost half of all marriages today end in divorce. And who knows how many more eventually become loveless. How imperfect human love can be --even at its best.

By contrast, however, God's perfect love is completely trustworthy. It is so different from our human love, that the early Christians had to find a whole new word for it. In pre-Christian Greek, by far the most common word for love was "philia" and its verb, "philein." And they were beautiful words.

As Mildred and Luverne Tengbom write in their book, Fill My Cup, "They recall an atmosphere of a crackling wood fire on a winter's evening with the snow falling softly outside. Of catching a whiff of home-baked bread. The sense of security that comes with crawling into bed with papa and mama while thunder shakes and rattles the windows and lightning bathes the room in startling white light. Of being greeted by a warm hug and a kiss and pot roast in the oven when you come home at the end of the day.

"Philia is being rocked in the rocking chair when your dog has died and later arms around you when a dearly loved family member has died. It is the tender concern your husband shows for you when you are pregnant. Philia is hearing your wife say, "I love you," before you drift off to sleep at night. It is your friends giving a surprise birthday party for you, or hearing your parents on the other end of the line when you're away at college, calling just because they want to hear your voice. Philia is bringing mother breakfast in bed on Mother's Day, even if the kitchen is a sticky mess. Philia is all this and more."

As I said, it is a beautiful word. And in John 16:27 we are told "the Father himself loves you . . ." with this kind of tender love. Why then was it used only rarely by the New Testament writers? Why did they use instead a word that rarely occurred in classical Greek? The reason is simple. Because, as good a word as philia was, it had limitations.

Philia is something we feel for sweetheart or family, but it is not good enough to describe the love of God "who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45)

Philia is fine for describing the tender affections we feel when everything is going well, but it may run dry when we have to tend a senile parent month after month, year after year, or when

a wayward child repeatedly disappoints his parents and brings dishonor to the family name. And it certainly falls short when a neighbor's radio wakes us up at five o'clock in the morning or her teen-age son zooms up and down our street on his motorcycle.

One day the great nineteenth century English preacher, C. H. Spurgeon was walking through the countryside with a friend. As they strolled along, he noticed a barn with a weather vane on its roof. At the top of the vane were these words: GOD IS LOVE. Spurgeon remarked to his companion that he thought this was an inappropriate place for such a message. "Weather vanes are changeable," he said, "but God's love is constant."

"I don't agree with you about those words, Charles," replied his friend. "You misunderstood the meaning. That sign is indicating a truth: No matter which way the wind blows, God is love."

God's love knows no limits, so the early church had to find a new word, to describe it. They called it agape. To quote the Tengboms again, "Loving with agape means willing other people's highest good, no matter who they are, what they are like, or what they have done. Agape is steadfast, unwavering, unchanging love."

That is the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That is the love that never ends. A love that deliberately chooses to seek the other's highest good, no matter what. A love that seeks, not limits, but outlets.

And that is the kind of love God has for us. That is why Jesus told those three priceless parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke: the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin, and the story of the lost son. That is why he said, ". . . there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7)

No matter what we do, God loves us. Loves us with a love that never quits. We can not deserve it, and we can not earn it. But we do not have to. It is not just something God does; it is what God is. And it is what He calls each one of us to become, not by our power, but by his limitless Grace. "So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John 4:16)