

“Incarnate Love”

Ephesians 2:11-22; James 2:14-21, 26;  
Luke 11:42-44

July 28, 2019

Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Incarnation. Now there's a word that we use all the time. In fact, I don't think we ever use it outside of a religious context. We could, perhaps, talk about somebody being the incarnation of something. Sometimes you might talk about somebody like Hitler as being the incarnation of evil. Perhaps you have had a boss who you would say was the incarnation of arrogance.

The idea is that some complex idea or some sense of the divine is embodied in a human being, a person. The idea of incarnation itself is one that I find incredibly amazing and hard to understand. It's hard to contemplate that God would even want to do that. In some ways, I think I grew up in a society that thought that if there is a God, that God is probably far off and doesn't really care that much. Sometimes I think I grew up in a Deist society where it was simply thought that God made everything, set it on its way, and now it's all up to us. Maybe somewhere at the end, God will say, “Come back home” or something.

Incarnation is one of those ideas where it suggests that God didn't just say “Good luck” and take off. God came and said, “Let me come among you so you can see,” because God so loved the world. I wonder why God would even pay attention. We hear that God loved the world. There's some way that God continues to embrace the creation God has made and indeed, enter into it.

It says that not only did God love the world, but that God wanted to enter so that we may not perish. As human beings, it feels like it's pretty easy to begin to set up ways that we try to make life easier, and yet in doing that I begin to structure my life in a way that constrains things because it's easier not to have to deal with some of the things I don't want to deal with, so I constrain what I do. I don't deal with the unknown as easily. I'm not one who enjoys conflict, so I try to find ways to not have conflict in my life. And yet, when I think about what God is doing when he sends his son that we may not perish, I wonder. There's a way we resist. I can set up my life such that I can begin to constrict it and divide it. I can hold grudges and work at having power. Yet, that kind of power really leads more to a place of constraint, limiting life and, may we even say, perishing. Human beings seem to have all this capability to be pretty hard on one another and ourselves in a way that can constrain and lead us to a place that isn't very life-giving, where we find ourselves perishing. But God comes so that we may not perish, so that we might have life and life everlasting, so we might enter into what God is about in creating us in the first place.

When we think about the incarnation, we think about Jesus coming as Emmanuel, as God with us. As we think about Jesus coming because God loves us and God wants us to experience the fullness of life, we might then think about what Jesus says, how he describes his ministry. So at the beginning of Luke 4, he announces what his ministry is

about. He says he has come to release the captives, to bring good news to the poor, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor will come. He says this is happening in him, God come among us.

I just want to note that last one; "the day of the Lord's favor will come" probably suggests something they called the jubilee year in the Old Testament—a time when all debts were to be forgiven. It's the idea of everyone starting over debt-free. When we are in a relationship of debt, there's also a relationship of power, a relationship that limits us. God wants to invite us to be a people who recognize the grace that he brings.

Jesus invites us to remember that it is about grace and reconciliation. The Ephesians passage invites us to recognize the ways we divide ourselves, the ways we decide that there are some that are good and some that are not. Some that have a right to have everything and some who don't. We can do it religiously or we can do it socially, but we tend to do it. Ephesians suggests directly that God came to put us together, that we be one rather than many. It doesn't mean we don't have any diversity about who we are. It means we don't divide and demean because of who we are.

As we have been working through these spiritual disciplines, I was thinking that some of the disciplines are really about what we experience. For this discipline today, we are at "I" – the incarnate love of Christ. Some of the disciplines are about experiencing and understanding the love of God or entering into a relationship with God, and some are acting out that love, being part of what God's about. As Jesus is incarnate, God is with us, the love of God is shown among us, the idea is that he invites us to engage with this reality. He invites us to be the incarnate love of God, to be the people who show the incarnate love of God.

Sometimes the expectation that I show the incarnate love of God becomes overwhelming because I don't think I can do so on my own. Indeed, this passage out of Ephesians suggests that we become one body, that we don't do it alone, that we actually become the body of Christ. It is as we work it out together and recognize the different gifts we each have that we become the body of Christ. We become the incarnate love of God continually being shown to the world. We struggle with that. We don't always do a great job of it. But it's the invitation to be the incarnate love of God, to allow God's love to be shown in us and embodied in who we are and how we live.

I think James says it in a different way. "Faith without works," he says, "is dead." If we could just talk about faith, that would be easy. This is where I probably struggle with it as much as anything because I know all kinds of things about the faith. I know a lot about theology, but I continue to have to work it out in my life, trying to figure out how I'm living it out, not just what I think about it. Embodying our faith is incarnating the love of Christ. It's something we get to do together. What James is suggesting is that as we do that, we also begin to experience the wonder and the fullness of life. It's not lifeless, but full of life just like a body full of the Spirit. When we breathe we're alive and full. When we do that together we are creating one new humanity, as it says in Ephesians.

I look at the world around us and how beautiful it is, and wonder at the joys of nature and the beauty and the feel of the breeze. I'll be pulling weeds in my garden and just think about the wonder of the world. Then, I have to deal with humanity. There are moments where I recognize the grace and the joy that we give one another and believe that's where God calls us. But I also recognize the struggles and the anxieties and the anger that we can exhibit toward one another. It is as we accept that God loves us and invites us to be God's people, I believe that we're invited to shift our perspective to allow God to show us the wonder of each unique human being and the opportunity to show one another grace and to give and encourage one another in our lives together.

It's important that as we think about this invitation to embody the love of God, we notice one way Jesus invites us to do that. As we gather around the table, one of the things we say as we come is that because there is one loaf, we, as many as we are, are one people. It's a oneness that is about table fellowship, about being members of the same family, of being in relationship with one another that is a real, tangible way of being. It's not just wishing one another well, but engaging with one another. Jesus invites us to show the love of God in our table fellowship, our sense of community or family.

When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, one of the things he said is, "You make all these little rules, but you don't live out the love and justice of God." Don't just be all show, and corrupt underneath. Rather, allow God to embody us and us to embody God—becoming together the body of Christ in the world today.

So as we come, we remember what God has done. God is willing to come among us, to experience our existence, and to help show us that God has created us to have the fullness of life, abundant life, in the relationships we share—the relationship we have with our world, with one another, and with our God.

As we come around the table, we are invited to recognize the idea that we are the body of Christ, one body, for it is of the one loaf that we partake. Amen.