

SERMON: **“Making Room in Our Hearts for Love.”** (Matt 22:34-40; 1 John 4:7-21)
Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, January 8, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church

Today is Epiphany – the Sunday on which we celebrate the coming to earth in human form of Jesus Christ to be the light of the world, revealing the full extent of God’s love for us and the scope of God’s purpose for us: which is why we spend each Epiphany learning about what God’s plan is for us as both individuals and as a people of faith. The Bible documents how God commands the People of God to teach, remind, and remember their story – the story of who we are – so that we will never forget what God has done for us and what God calls us to be and do. (Deut 6:4-9) In this command God makes it clear: we must remind ourselves of who we were created to be because now, more than ever, our future depends on our not only knowing who we are, but also on our putting our faith into action as a community of faith.

Scripture paints a clear picture of a God who not only lives in community but also longs for His creation to live in community both with Him and with each other. First, with Adam (Gen. 1:26), God created us to be-with Him in relationship. Why? Because it takes two hearts to know love – and to know heart break. Later, after the fall, God tried again with Abraham – and then with Moses and the People of Israel – by entering into a covenant relationship where He promised to be their God and they would be His people. (Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7) But, once again God’s heart would break as His people strayed by turning away from Him and by turning on their neighbours. Then, as we heard on Christmas Eve, God, out of His love for us, sent His Son to be-with us in the flesh to fulfill His promise of salvation and to bring about the restoration of our relationship with Him. (John 1:1-3, 3:16; Phil. 2:5-11) Since God – who, as the Trinity – exists in community created us in His likeness, we have within our DNA the need for community – the need to live in relationships: to be human is to hunger for community. Seen this way the Bible is the story of God’s plan for us to live as we were created, in community.

With Jesus – who, as Emmanuel, came to be God-with us – God provided a model of community for us that revealed His love for us. (Matt. 1:23) By calling the disciples Jesus created a community like no other so that the world would see and know the joy of the kingdom of heaven on earth. (Mark 3:13-14) And, before leaving them for the last time, Jesus commissioned the disciples who had lived and walked with Him – who had learned first-hand about the Good News of God’s grace – to, in turn, go out and to be His Body in the world. (Mark 16:19-20; Acts 1:6-9) Community is God’s desire for us; it was Jesus’ prayer for us that we may be one – with God and with one another – as He and the Father and Holy Spirit are one. (John 17:11, 21, 23) But, here’s the catch: if we, the Church (the Body of Christ) fail at community, we fail at our commission – if we as a community of faith fail at living out what it means to be-with one another as God/Christ longs for us to, then Christ is not in us/our midst and no matter what we say or do Christ – God’s love – will not be revealed to the world. This begs the question: what kind of community are we called to be-in then?

For the past six years, for the season of Epiphany, we have heard how the Acts 2 Church offers us an example of what a Church should be while it confronts us with the radical nature of Christian love which certainly runs contrary to our own conception of love. And yet it was this kind of love – the love for God and for neighbour that made Christ known – that transformed to world as the first Church manifested God’s love through its commitment to living in loving community. The readings we just heard make it clear that we are called to love one another in a way that goes beyond mere affection. Arising from Jesus’ command for us to love God and one another heard in Matthew John, in his letter, re-issues the command for all those who call themselves Christian to live in love – and to express that love by living in true and loving community with each other. In his first letter John urges the members of the early Church that “*since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*” (1 John 4:11) But he also says that this love should not be a love expressed merely “*in word or speech, but in truth and action.*” (1 John 3:18) In other words, the mark of our faith is not the talk but the walk: in Jesus we see this – He didn’t simply talk about His love, He died because of it. The Acts 2 Church expressed this love: they showed us that it is possible to love the way Jesus loved – that love is the defining trait of what it means to be a Christian: as the hymn says; “*they will know us by our love.*” But, if we are honest, can we say that we truly practice this love?

In 2005 – as an exercise – I had you put on coloured name tags and asked you to introduce yourself to someone wearing a different coloured name tag than yours: that Sunday we learned that many of you didn’t know each other, even though you have been worshipping together for years. What this taught me was that it is possible to attend worship – to come and go – without engaging or connecting with anyone except God. This might seem desirable to some of you, but it’s not what is desirable to God! The early Church knew each other because their primary goal was to share God’s love: it was to live out their love for God by living in love with their neighbours – those who not only lived next door but who sat next to them in the pew. This is why, this Epiphany, we are beginning not only a new series entitled “***Making Room in Our Hearts,***” but are also launching a new initiative that is hoped will greatly enrich the quality of our community as we seek to know God together. The phrase, “*making room in our hearts,*” is one that Paul uses in his second Letter to the Corinthians when he implores those Christians listening to his words to make room in their hearts for what God has called them to do as new creations in Christ, as the embodiment of Christ – God’s love, the Body of Christ – the Church, not because we haven’t already opened our hearts to God’s call but because, as a people of faith, we are called to go the extra step: to love others as God has loved us. Over the next five weeks, as we will examine what this might mean as we, as a people chosen to bring about God’s kingdom on earth, attempt to model God’s love by making room in our hearts for a similar kind of love for our neighbours.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for love – for loving God by loving others. Amen