

Love: What Are You Waiting For?

Luke 1:26-38

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One Sunday evening, I joined the Covenant youth group for some holiday fun. We made glittery ornaments, ate too much sugar, and compared notes about which ugly sweater we'd wear to the annual party. After a while, we broke into groups, and our contemporary worship director gave us a challenge: Write a new song for Advent using a popular tune and our own lyrics. I'm pretty sure I was more excited than the youth about this, because I do this sort of thing all the time in my own head (and no, I won't sing one of my originals for you).

We broke into groups, and our group received the Advent theme of love. We settled on a tune—"All You Need Is Love," by the Beatles, obviously. Then I asked the youth in my group, "OK, so what is love?"

"Unconditional," someone said. "OK," I said. "What does unconditional love look like?" Lots of silence. A few people turned to Google. One said, "Siri, show me love!" I said, "OK, how about parents waiting in a carpool line?" "Oh yeah!" they said. "I don't know how my mom doesn't go crazy." "Alright what else," I asked? More silence. So I asked again, "How about taking friends a bowl of soup when they're sick?" "Huh," they said. "That would be a really nice thing to do. Do people do that?"

Apparently, our kids aren't the only ones a bit confused about the love-language of soup-giving. Alexandra Solomon is one of Northwestern University's most popular professors, a licensed clinical therapist, and a researcher in the areas of marriage, family, sex, and relationships. One afternoon she was with graduate students in talk therapy group and engaged her students in a conversation that went much like this:

Dr. Solomon said, "OK, tell me, if we've been spending a lot of time together and I get sick, are you bringing me soup?" Every single person in the group said no. So, Dr. Solomon asked, "Why not?"

One student responded, "Well, as an individual, you're supposed to have so much together before you can get into those kinds of relationships with other people where you're taking care of them."

"Huh," Dr. Solomon said. "So, what do you have to have together before you're ready to take someone soup? You all have degrees and loans and jobs and pay rent. What are you waiting for?"

One man said, "Growing up, there's immense pressure from parents and other authority figures to focus on the self. It's hard to find time for relationships when the baseball team practices at 6:30, school starts at 8:15, drama rehearsal is at 4:15, the soup kitchen starts serving at 6, and, oh yeah, your screenplay needs completion."

One woman agreed, saying she finds this attitude that love and relationships are secondary to academic and professional success hard to shake. "Before, it was, well, I need to finish school. But next, I'll need to get a

practice going. Then, it'll be I need to do this and this, and then I'll think about love. But by 30, we wake up and are like, 'What is love? What's it like to be in a loving relationship outside your family?'"

Dr. Solomon hears this all the time, particularly among affluent young adults. They're simply unpracticed and unsure, practically speaking, about what goes into adult relationships, not just romantic ones but friendships too.

Last week, as George W. Bush eulogized his father, a remarkably hard task for anyone, he expressed gratitude for his father teaching him about such things. He remembered something his father had said at his inauguration:

We cannot hope to leave our children only a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home and neighborhood and town better than he found it. What do we want the men and women who work with us to say when we are no longer there? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us? Or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment there to trade a word of friendship.

It seems that President Bush had a sense thirty years ago that our society was struggling with where modern love fits into our market-driven lives.

But I wonder if we don't put the stuff of love and relationships behind other things on our to-do lists not just because we're so driven to succeed, but because work and professional pursuits carry less risk than cultivating the relationships of love we long to enjoy. It's not hard to see that one of our deepest, most primal fears, one that begins in our cribs, is that when we cry out into the world for love, we won't receive care in return. It starts early and it really doesn't go away.

One of you here at Covenant who's just a few years older than I am confessed the truth of it to me one day when you said, "God made babies cute so people would want to take care of them. God made a big mistake when he didn't make us elderly people cute too." For the record, I don't think beauty is only found in the young, but I get it. All of us have felt unlovely or have feared being left alone. We wonder if we've done something that makes us unloveable. We've stood at the edge of a chasm of pain after someone has hurt us and wondered how long we'll have to wait for things to be good again. Others of us have lost a dear one through death or divorce, and we're literally just cut off from a past life that can't be rebuilt.

It's not exactly the stuff of Mariah Carey Christmas love songs, but in fact, this gets right at the heart of the Christmas story, because these are exactly the kinds of places in our lives where God's love is just waiting to be born anew. Consider the story we read today about Mary, whom we know as the mother of Jesus. We meet her at a time in her life that was the very definition of the Facebook status "It's complicated."

She was betrothed to a man named Joseph, which means that she was promised in marriage to him as a young bride, but she hadn't left her parents' home to go and live with him yet. Mary lived in a very small town called Nazareth, where most people in the community were probably kin to each other. In the ancient world, it might have been a bit like Tar Heel town in Bladen County. Population 100. Half an hour drive to

Fayetteville. Home to an enormous pig processing plant. Unemployment at 25%. I don't know how the people of Tar Heel town see their home, but I am pretty sure that people from Charlotte don't see it as enviable. The same was true of Nazareth. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian from the Galilee, writes of 45 towns in the region and never mentions Nazareth. The Talmud, the collected writings from Jewish rabbis in the ancient world, mentions 63 towns in Galilee, but never mentions Nazareth.

A town that did get a lot of mention near to Nazareth was Sepphoris, the financial and cultural capital of the region in Jesus' time. Sepphoris had great schools, a bustling market, beautiful villas with mosaic floors, and jobs. It was where many of us who worship at Covenant might have lived. Sepphoris was likely where the people of Nazareth went to find service work. They'd walk an hour for manual labor or housekeeping in the beautiful villas and schools, and then walk an hour back to their hillside homes.

By the way, when I say hillside homes, I don't mean mountain houses on stilts. I mean many of the people of Nazareth lived in caves because they were affordable housing. They didn't require purchased or processed materials to build. Of course, many people in the world still live in caves. Some because their families have lived subsistence lifestyles since the beginning of time. Others, such as families I've met from outside of Jerusalem and Kabul, once had beautiful homes built over generations of farming and selling the fruits of their labor. But in the last century, occupying armies have destroyed their homes and made it unsafe to work their land, and they had nowhere to go but underground. They were cut off. That was part of Mary's family history. In fact, her town's name bears the evidence of it.

In Hebrew, the root word *netzer* means branch or shoot. Have you ever seen a stump of a tree that has been cut down, but out of the side, a little twig has started to grow? That's a *netzer*. It's the thing that grows out of a stump into a new tree. The people who settled in those hillside caves that Mary lived in but we would not envy didn't name their town "The way-out, good-for-nothing-but-a-pig-processing-plant town." They named their town, "*Netzer, nasareth*, the shoot," as in the words of Isaiah,

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

Mary was a proud *netzerean*: yes, a girl who grew up in a cave; yes, a teenage bride betrothed to a local man likely her elder; yes, almost certainly illiterate with no formal education; yes, a member of the *anawim*, those others called "the poor." But Mary was also one who knew that good things came out of Nazareth, things like loving parents and kind neighbors, people who walked humbly with their God and watched for good things to grow out of even old cut off stumps.

This model of faith was so compelling that in some circles, early Christians were called Nazarenes because they followed the man Jesus of Nazareth. Some of those early Christians made their way to southern India and invited others to join them. And when I visited Kerala, in southern India, I met Christians who told me they were part of this group, the *Nasrani*.

Why make such a big deal of where Jesus came from and who Mary was? Well, isn't it interesting that the central figure of our faith, the one we call teacher, savior, lord, was taught the ways of the world by an illiterate mother who slept each night on the floor of a cave?

When God was considering who might be a good provider, parent, and guardian for her son, apparently money, security, education, though all fine things, weren't the core criteria. It wasn't a risk-free, squeaky-clean life with a clear-cut way for love to be born into her life. It was a *nasrani*, a *nazarene*, one who trusted that even out of a cut off stump of a life, with God, love could be born anew and even flourish.

It seems that in our society, where we struggle with where love fits in with market priorities, we may need more of this trust, this faith that love can make a home in any life. This fall, I got connected with the Galilee Center here in Charlotte. If you visited the Alternative Gift Market last week, you may have seen knitted hats and bags at their table. They connected me with a family who had moved to Charlotte in recent months through the UN refugee resettlement program. This was a family of eight lives in a three-bedroom apartment across town, and I spent time with the Mom and her six girls every Thursday evening.

One night at sunset, when the mom went to her bedroom to pray, the girls closed ranks on me like we were at a sleepover and the parents had finally gone to bed. They showed me a bin of plastic bottles someone had brought them and asked me what to do with them. I considered telling them it was just unnecessary petroleum in a world of climate change, but they were teenagers desperate to fit into their new schools, so I told them about conditioner and how to use it. They asked me about my diet, because they had noticed that American women were skinny and must not eat very much. I said, didn't they notice that I ate whatever their mother put in front of me?

But then came the kicker. They said, "When we go to school wearing our head coverings and girls notice that we are the people who pray five times a day, they don't like us. They don't want to talk to us and be our friends." Then they just looked at me, as if to say, "What's wrong with your people?"

I said, "I'm really sorry. That must be so frustrating. I know you want to have friends at school. You are smart, beautiful, fun, kind, and anyone would be lucky to have you as friends. Keep trying?" They said, "Yes. We will keep trying." But I know and you know how hard it is to keep trying when you reach out into the world hoping to make a connection of friendship and love and people don't reach back in kind. You feel cut off.

When I left them that evening, the girls were studying math I never learned, speaking in four languages, communicating with relatives around the world, snuggling with their baby sisters, and taking breaks from their studies to practice English with their mother—a woman whom no one else had ever taught to read.

These girls had a faith like Mary's that love and vitality could be reborn in their crowded new home here in Charlotte. So, I prayed that when they would touch their foreheads to the ground, the love of God would be reborn in their hearts, so that they

would know that they are loved for who they are. And I prayed that when they walk into their schools, the love of God would be reborn in the hearts and minds of those they meet, so that they could receive the friendship and kindness and care they were so desperately waiting for.

In this Advent season, we look to God's saving grace for all of us who wait for a fuller experience of love in our lives: for those of us who can't compete, and those who have no practice in the ways of love and relationships, for those who have tried and failed, for those who have been cut off from the love they knew, and particularly for the meek of the earth who bear the brunt of our not only messy, but often violent human life and long to see the fruits of love flourish in their lives again.

And we can trust that the love of God will be reborn into all of our lives. For we remember that love was reborn into the life of a young illiterate woman. Love was reborn into the life of a woman who, like her son, grew up like a *netzer*, a young shoot, like a root out of dry ground. She had no form or majesty that we should look at her, nothing in her appearance that we should desire to be like her. Or rather, there was nothing in her appearance that we should desire to be like her until Gabriel said, "Hey Mary, God loves you beyond measure, will be kind to you, and has a very important role for you in the history of the world." And after that, when people have seen the face of Mary, we have seen the face of God. We've thought, what an enviable person of faith, a model for having the courage to make all other concerns secondary to the task of loving those whom God has given us to love.

The invitation of Christmas, when we celebrate the incarnation of God in human form, is to see the face of God in every human form—in those we have seen as lovely and those we have thought to be unlovely, perhaps even ourselves. It's a time when we remember that God holds us all in equal significance, each of us loved and graced no more or less than anyone else. We don't have to be perfect to be deserving of love. We don't have to have it all together or know exactly how to do it to give love well. We can be who we are, because complicated, work-in-progress people and places aren't where love goes to die. They're precisely where God's love goes to be reborn.

So, I'd like to share an Advent invitation with you from my Uptown Bible Study group — the challenge they offered themselves after reading the story of Mary this week. It's easy to go through the motions of the season, they said. To do all the holiday things and expect the same things to happen. But Mary allowed something wildly unexpected and disruptive to captivate her. She made time to listen, to be in awe, and to wonder about what God might be up to in her life. "Perhaps," my Bible study friends said, "we should take time to do precisely these things each day." Perhaps those of us who have a relative degree of privilege and self-sufficiency (which all of us in that room did) should allow ourselves to be overshadowed, overtaken, and transfigured by an opportunity to love selflessly. So, whether it's welcoming someone far from home, teaching someone to read, asking for forgiveness, reminding someone she's lovely, or taking a sick neighbor a bowl of soup, let love be born in you in a new way. And I imagine that someone in this weary world will rejoice and say, "Oh! This is just the gift of love I've been waiting for."