

1 John 4: 7-21

April 29, 2018

Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In the fifth installment of my new favorite mystery series, Aunt Dimity's Christmas, Lori Shepherd's ideal Christmas in a small English village is completely disrupted by the arrival of a tramp passed out in the snow in her front yard. For reasons no one knows, this tramp has sought out her house, perhaps because of the previous owner and Lori's benefactor, the late Dimity Westwood.

The townspeople are horrified that a tramp has entered their perfect little community. They are further appalled that, because of a snowstorm, an RAF helicopter was called in to lift the vagrant to hospital. There is something compelling about this man. Lori comes to believe that there is more to his life than meets the eye. Her attention to him earns her the hostility of her fellow villagers as well as the exasperation of her family and friends. Her much anticipated perfect Christmas for her husband, father-in-law and 9 month old twins lies in

scattered boxes, an askew Christmas tree and pan after pan of burnt gingerbread men. Yet as she probes the mystery of this lost soul she cares less and less about her precious Christmas.

Meanwhile, her lawyer husband has to go to Boston to handle a tricky estate and her father-in-law volunteers to take his son's place as Joseph in the pageant which is a disaster in the making with ill will pervading the sloppy production—all due to the animosity generated by the tramp.

On the Sunday morning before Christmas Lori brings the twins to church. She is surprised by how many people have come. She is even more surprised by the vicar's homily. Up to this point his sermons have been, in Lori's words, "low-key enough to serve as lullabies." But this Sunday was different.

On this, the fourth Sunday of Advent, I would like to speak to you of a certain visitor who recently passed through our community. He was a stranger to our village; a poor man dressed in ragged clothes. He was hungry yet he asked no one for food. He was ill, yet he asked for no one's help. Had he done so, I fear, he would have been hard pressed to find so much as a crumb of kindness among us. He was a poor man and a stranger and

therefore not worthy of our kindness. The poor, as we all know, are a filthy lot—diseased, dishonest and deserving of their fate. And as strangers, you'll agree, must be treated with suspicion. As we celebrate the birth of our Lord, let us remember that in the eyes of God no man is poor, and no man is a stranger. In this season of rejoicing, let us be thankful for blessings received and eager to share those blessings with others. Let us see in the poorest among us the face of the Christ Child.

The vicar's words have a transforming effect on the people of the village. It is as if they have awakened to their inner stranger—the one they have repressed and kept under wraps. And more wonderful, at the same time there awakens in each soul a deep generosity which was submerged along with the fear and revulsion.

I begin this way because it is simply not possible to enter into the heart of John's letter of love with theology. John's words will turn to dust if I try to "explain what they mean." Perhaps when his letter was read to the early Christian communities they were smart enough to leave the words alone. Maybe it was possible back then.

But we are faced with a problem. In the fourteen verses we have just heard, John has used the word "love" twenty-five times. Yet

nowhere does he spell out how that word is supposed to be lived in daily life. What we receive is exhortation to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. We hear that those who do not love are not connected to God because God is love. We are told that this love has nothing to do with our love for God and everything about God's love for us before all time. We are told that there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear. We are told that we are not perfected in love as if such perfection might be possible. To love is to abide in God and not to love is to be alienated from God.

All of this is so beautiful! But what are we to do with it? As I listed out the qualities and existential realities of love as enumerated by John I felt like a hungry child with his nose pressed against the plate glass storefront of a bakery ogling over the iced cakes and other pastries--tantalized by aromas but unable to taste a single bite.

There several possible responses to this invisible barrier between the beauty of John's words and actually experiencing them. The first is the easiest and most tragic. It is to assume that the love that John

describes *is* inaccessible. It is a love available to the handful of saints who appear in every generation: Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King Jr. We ordinary folk who plod through life caught in a web of morally ambiguous choices can never attain the purity of heart of these spiritual and moral exemplars. Thus we lower our expectations of ourselves, and each other. Most terribly, we lower our expectations of God or give up on the idea of God entirely. We take the path of least resistance and bemoan the emptiness of life without recognizing that *our own* diminished expectations have hollowed out our living. This is the response of despair. It is the prevailing attitude of materialism.

But there is another response. It is what Jesus called the narrow way, what Robert Frost referred to as the road less traveled. This path requires the child to pull away from the bakery window and do the work necessary to return and taste the treats. It is the path of Jesus' parables of the lost coin and the pearl of great price. It is the path of the one who discovers the holy power of yearning for something that she cannot ever completely attain, but discovers that the yearning and

seeking are the rewards of the journey. This is the way of divine love which lies within each human soul dormant and ready to be awakened. The apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 13 when, after his lyrical hymn to divine love concludes by saying, "Make love your aim."

What is the work required for this difficult but rewarding journey? The prophet Micah captures it when, in answer to his question, "What does the Lord require of you?" he answers: "to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

To be a person of faith is to live with ideals which daily call us to live beyond our perceived limitations and to trust that *our yearning* is actually *God's yearning within us*. To borrow from the contemplative Thomas Merton, it is enough to want to please God for in our yearning to please God we *really do please him*.

We gather in community to be reminded that the path of divine love is our true path and to be encouraged by Jesus, the living Word of God, to follow that path despite all of our flaws and missteps.

Sometimes, as in the homily of the vicar, we are called to account for

having wandered far off this path. Yet the Word, having stung, gives our hands a tender squeeze and *with love* leads us back on the way. Amen.