

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Incarnational Love & Mission”
By Eric Howell
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It's worth repeating because sometimes even people who live at the intersection of cradle roll street and favorite pew street within the walls of the kingdom of God somehow escape hearing this news. The King of Kings became a human being. If you plow through all of the wrapping paper and decorations of the last few weeks, this is what is at the root of it all. God became human. That inescapable, incomprehensible idea can catch you unsuspecting of its power. God became human. This decision on God's part . . . this act . . . this risk . . . is called love by the ancient sages. It's called Love by the one who came Himself. Remember what He said, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). This act of God becoming human is called love. And even more so, when we look on this act of God becoming human in the man called Jesus, we see the sort of love with which God loves the world.

For God ‘so’ loved the world is often assumed to mean that God loved the world so much that God gave His son. And that's wrong, but it makes sense. The gift of the son would prove to be a costly gift. As we all know, Jesus, the sweet little baby on Christmas morning, grows up and suffers at our hands. So, to appreciate that God gave His Son is to acknowledge the largess of the gift. But we ought to already be suspicious of this interpretation. Can we quantify love? Is there more love and less love? Perhaps. Elizabeth Barrett-Browning [not Emily Dickenson as previously reported!] thought in quantifiable terms, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways? I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach”

Perhaps our love has degrees and can fluctuate. Certainly, there are times when we feel more love than other times. There are relationships in which love grows over time. And there are relationships in which love diminishes and is extinguished.

But this is us we are talking about when we talk about degrees of love, being able to quantify love. When we talk about God's love, we are talking about God, so we are talking about the One who is perfect love. 1 John 4 tells us that God is love. 1 Corinthians 13 talks about some of the characteristics of God's love: patient, kind, does not envy or boast, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love is clearly the primary identifying characteristic of God. But how might we quantify such love? If the philosophers are right that God is ‘impassable,’ then we are disallowed from suggesting that God's love can increase or decrease. God's love is the same always, yesterday, today, and forever. God's love didn't swell just before giving us Jesus. It was always the same. So we are left with saying, God always loved the world so much that at one moment, God sent his Son. God's love doesn't fluctuate, but is it measurable?

Only if eternity is measurable. Only if infinity is measurable. God's love is only quantifiable if you can measure God Himself because . . . God is love. Linguistically,

John 3:16 is built on the same foundation. The Greek of John 3:16 is more precise than the English. A more literal translation reads kind of clumsily, but it makes a more accurate point, “God loved the world like this: God sent His Son.” This suggests that the issue is not the quantity of God’s love—certainly it is enough to fill the universe—the issue is the quality of God’s love. What is God’s love like?

Again, 1 Corinthians 13 gives us some suggestions: patient, kind, and the like. And we might find other answers in poetry or hymns. But the ultimate answer is in the gospel: The love of God is in the giving of His Son to be human. And this takes us back to what happened in Bethlehem and from there to Nazareth and from there to Jerusalem and Calvary and beyond. The gift to the world of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the answer to the question: What is God’s love like? At least we know this: God loved the world this way—God sent his Son.

It’s a particular kind of love and we might attach adjectives to describe it when we think of Jesus: God’s love is surprising, sacrificial, grace-filled, truth-telling . . . miraculous, saving, redeeming.

We have a theology term for all of it: incarnation. The incarnation is when God became human.

This is also an adjective: incarnational. This is the kind of love God showed—incarnational love. This is the kind of love we are to show if we are to show God’s love—incarnational love. It’s love made real, and near. It’s hands and feet. God’s love has an accent. It has flesh. It looks a lot like friendship. I’ve come to the point of thinking that you don’t really know someone until you share a meal with him or her and swing a hammer next to him or her.

Several years ago I saw first hand the fruit of incarnational love. After college, I went to work in South Florida helping rebuild homes and lives after Hurricane Andrew. I was there only a short time working with people who spent a decade there. There I met Felix, a Hispanic man with a thick mustache and a big contagious smile, whose home had been badly damaged in the storm. The winds tore off his roof, the rains ruined the floors, their poverty kept his family in the damaged house. They had nowhere else to go. So they lived with a blue tarp over the hole in the roof and tried to make it day by day. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship sent some folks down there to pass out water and food after the storm, and after many relief organizations left, they stayed and developed relationships. One of those was with Felix. And they went to work on his house. Felix joined them when he was off his own job. The money for plywood and shingles came from little old ladies in churches all over who donated. Volunteer groups from Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, even Texas came down to work a week at a time. Felix worked when he could. And his house was slowly rebuilt. One late afternoon, sitting on the roof of his house with one of the volunteer workers, taking a break from hammering shingles, Felix looked out over the neighborhood and pointed down the street, “you see those people over there?” The volunteer looked over. There was a small group of people going door to door handing out pamphlets and wanting to talk about their religion. If you’ve ever owned a front door, you’d recognize these people. Felix said, “You see those people, they like to talk. They come around here on sunny afternoons and want to

talk about what they believe.” He paused. “But you, you come and work with me on my house. You get to know my kids. You are here when it’s raining. I want to know what you believe.” That afternoon Felix was introduced to God who became a man.

That’s what incarnational love is like. It’s being with people. It’s not easy. It’s not quick. It’s messy. It’s for the long haul. It can’t walk away when things get tough. It’s there. Jesus lived this kind of life. He dealt with messy situations. One time there was this leper that no one else would even get close to, hardly within earshot. Jesus sees him and puts His hands right on him and heals him. That’s incarnational love. Another time Jesus went to the home of a man who was a terrible sinner and ate a meal with him . . . in his own home. And then there’s that time Jesus saw all those people hungry on the hillside and fed them.

When I think of mission, the images that come to my mind are of my friend Leo who started befriending Hispanic children and their families on the farms and started advocating for them and providing transportation, jobs, English classes, and had his new friends to his table for meals. I think of my friend Jen who lives in a neighborhood with immigrants and she has just naturally gotten to know the other moms, and she listens to their plights and prays for them, and their kids are running in and out of each other’s houses. And I think of my friend Stephanie who started driving her car into a subsidized housing complex to pick up kids for Sunday School and piled more and more of them into her car, and she got to know the families and showed love—sometimes tough love—to those kids because she loved them with all her heart. I think of my friend Arville in Macedonia who got a call from the local Muslim imam to see if he could get any medicines to help the refugees from Kosovo who were sleeping on the floor of the mosque. Within a day Arville had money from churches in the states and bought medicines and gave them to the imam as a show of friendship.

That’s mission the way mission is supposed to be. The word mission comes from the Latin *missio*, a word employed in the doctrine of the Trinity to describe the Father sending the Son and the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit. Mission means sending, as in the incarnation. Mission is incarnational. It means that it goes ‘all in.’ One Eastern Orthodox theologian puts it like this: God’s love manifests itself in *kenosis*, that is, in “inner, voluntary self-denial which makes room to receive and embrace the other to whom one turns” (Voulgarakis, 1965).

This word *kenosis* is foreign to our ears but is helpful to deepening our understanding of what mission is. If the incarnation is any guide, God’s love is a *kenosis* kind of love; it’s emptying ourselves into someone else. That doesn’t happen in an instant, but usually in a relationship. We are called then to be church with others not just the church for others. The difference is subtle, but important. A church for others is a program, a resource, an institution, a vending machine. A church with others is a partner, showing hospitality and friendship. A church with others has a hope that all people will come to know Jesus Christ, but doesn’t impose that evangelistic goal on everyone. Such a church trusts that the sent Holy Spirit is on mission and present and working in the lives, the meal the neighborhoods, the conversation. A **church for others** might do missions by sending some money or some people. A church **with others** understands the sending is what God has already done to them. We are missioned to the world. We are

missioned to this city to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate, to invite, to introduce.

This is hard. It is much, much easier to put together a program, stand back, and let it do its thing. It is much, much easier to write a check. There are places for programs. There is a need for checks. But the real spiritual work happens when deep contemplative prayer meets actions of pure love. Thomas Merton writes, “On that level action and contemplation are fused into one entity by the love of God and our brother in Christ” (Contemplative Prayer, 115).

At the incarnation God became man as the Father missioned the son to the world to save those who were perishing. Word took action. How shall our good words take action? Probably in as many different ways as there are people here. Each of us has a course throughout the day that intersects with the lives of other people. Each of us has passions and interests and callings. Those passions have manifested in some good work serving lunches to people who need a smiling face and a hot meal at the Gospel Café, leading worship and making friends at Ridgecrest. Your lives have been enriched by this work, I think.

Over the course of the years the question has bubbled up from time to time . . . what would happen if we all who share this place in common got together and put some focused effort in one direction? That question seems to be bubbling up at this time. Maybe it could be phrased like this: What could happen if this church with all of its resources and minds and hearts and talents got focused on a mission? Imagine what we could do! Imagine what we could accomplish! But I hope you already see that that’s the wrong way to ask the question. The first question isn’t a question of our resources or what we might accomplish. The first question is more subtle, but more profound. Let us instead ask who are we called to be with one another and with others, and then let us be that with one another and with others. It will take a shape. It will have hands and feet and will have a location and a price tag and all of those things. But let it first be the continued journey of the discovery of how God has incarnated His love within us.

This is a special place with a tremendous gift to give to many people. And this is a special city that in many pockets is hurting terribly. Into this place of hospitality and formation, of hope and love, into this place of pain and suffering, may the grace of God come near.

Let it be said someday, DaySpring loves this city like this: They give themselves completely to it that both DaySpring and the city may more fully know and believe in the One who sent His Son that we may all share together abundant, eternal life.