

**“An Altogether Love” - Luke 1:5-20 - Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs**

This is the third Sunday of Advent. We have looked at “Altogether Peace” and “Altogether Hope.” Today we look at “An Altogether Love” by April Casperson who wrote, “Too often, we settle for an “almost love” instead of the real thing. We content ourselves with a pale beam that leaves plenty of shadows rather than a bright illumination that can fill the world. Almost love is a love that welcomes only the parts of people that are desirable or easy to handle. In contrast, and altogether love - the evil-conquering kind of love - is a love that welcomes the whole person and honors that we are made-up of many parts. Altogether love is cross-cultural and countercultural. It can seem irrational to love in this way or to be loved in this way.”

I appreciate John Wesley because he truly grappled with what it meant to be an ethical, moral, good person. He came to see love as the key to it all. In his sermon “The Almost Christian” he laid the groundwork for how some people who are not Christian can and do live out moral, ethical, and loving lives. He goes on to explain how even a superficial Christian can carry out a loving lifestyle. This “almost Christian” is a loving person, caring for creation, exerting self-control, and even engaging in the practice of religion.

The “almost Christian” the woman or man living an almost love - this person is not bad or evil, but this person does exhibit a lack of depth. The almost Christian is characterized by outward actions, thoughts, and feelings that do not penetrate all the way to the heart.

Even the most committed Christian may find herself or himself somewhat dismayed at a Sunday morning worship experience. We all want to “feel good” when we come to church - to hear an uplifting message, sing and hear music that speaks to us, and to be reminded of God’s role in our lives. But we also long for more than a superficial experience of temporary happiness. We long for truth of the wonder, mystery, hope, and love of God in our lives.

Have you ever reluctantly confessed to a friend that going to church feels good, but sometimes the experience feels like it misses the mark? Have you ever heard a sermon that, upon reflection, only included instructions on “being a good person” and didn't include any substantive insights about how God is working in our lives?

Good deeds come from an altogether love not out of obligation or because they aren't a good idea, but because they are natural expressions of love. In other words, they are “love in action.” And as the advent season and scriptures remind us, this kind of love is risky requiring hope and even seeming at times to be irrational.

Advent is an affirmation of the now and the not yet. I love advent precisely because we don't have the whole story in front of us, and in that there is a sense of hopefulness - the sense of the world pointing in a specific direction, toward an unexpected thing that is deeply irrational. How in the world could a baby be something so powerful that it has transformed all of creation?

Advent is a fresh start and a season of revisioning what could happen. And advent is a willingness to look into the future and be willing to embrace the irrational as the way of love. In the advent narrative, God uses normal people in very unexpected, irrational ways.

Advent reminds us that love shows up in the most unexpected places, transforming flawed, imperfect people into people redeemed by love. God compels us to move from an “almost love” (the love that we think is based upon who we are and what we do) to an “altogether love” (a love that grows to fill all spaces, bringing light wherever there is darkness).

When we open ourselves to wonder and love, we are reminded that we are not the center of the universe. If our ability to be loved was rooted in our flawed selves, there is no way that we would ever be worthy of love. But God gently meets us in our imperfections, God pauses for us to ask questions, and then God welcomes us with open arms into an altogether love.

For Wesley, the Christian life steeped in love had some outward signs, but the hallmark of the love of a Christian was that faithfulness was practiced in private - much like Mary's conversation with the Angel and her subsequent decision to accept love and the unknown. It is in these holy, private connections between us and God that we can decide to say yes to love - to move from an almost love, a love held at arm's length, to an altogether love, a love that we fully embrace, even as God has been there all along. Alleluia and Amen.

### **We Celebrate God's Love**

Jeffrey B. Childs 12/10/2024

We celebrate God's love,  
Coming down from above,  
On Christmas Day.  
God's love to us imparts,  
God's love upon our hearts,  
That a new life now starts,  
To love that way.

God came to be with us,  
In the baby Jesus.  
Let us rejoice.  
Share the Good News today,  
Through all we do and say,  
And with thanks, let us pray.  
Lift up your voice.

God, thank you for this gift.  
To you our prayers we lift,  
And sins confess.  
All things have now been changed.  
Our lives are rearranged.  
We're no longer estranged,  
We have been blessed.