

Loving Those God Loves

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. All right, today we're going to start with a little lesson in Anglicanism. That's our tradition. Church of the Advent is an Anglican church. If this is your first time or first experience in an Anglican church, compared to other traditions, you might notice a lot of scripture being read during this service.

We read three, sometimes four scripture lessons in a worship service, plus a lot of the liturgy, the prayers, songs, the things we say and sing are filled with scripture.

So it's really Bible-based. So how do we determine what scripture we read during a worship service? Well, there's a three-year cycle of scripture lessons that most Anglican churches use together.

So if you were to tune into other live streams of Anglican worship this morning from right where you're sitting, you might find at this exact moment, like the same scripture readings being read as were read this morning.

This is called the lectionary. This is the organized table of readings that we do. It's three years long. And each year is organized according to the liturgical calendar, which we have a representation of up here.

[1 : 1 8] So the calendar year starts on the left, the season of Advent. This year, Advent starts on December 3rd. It's the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day.

Advent lasts about four weeks. It's about expecting and awaiting the birth of Jesus. And then Christmas is December 25th. That season lasts for 12 days, ergo, 12 days of Christmas.

Then there's Epiphany, which lasts until Ash Wednesday, which begins the season of Lent, which you may have heard of. It's a season of fasting and repenting.

All right. How's that? Lent lasts 40 days until Easter Day. Easter lasts 50 days. Then we have the day of Pentecost, which is about the Holy Spirit being gifted unto the church and filling the world.

After Pentecost, we have this other six months of the year, which we call ordinary time. Now, ordinary here doesn't mean, like, common or average.

[2 : 2 6] Ordinary comes from the word ordinal. In other words, like, during this time, we are marking time. Now, the theme of ordinary time comes right after Pentecost. It's the work of God's people in the world.

The Pentecost, God descends on the church. The Holy Spirit descends on the church. And the church now has a mission into the world to renew, restore, to proclaim the gospel. Last week, you heard Tommy preach about the Holy Spirit's work through the church's sacrificial generosity.

Today, we're going to talk about the passionate love of God. We're going to talk about an obstacle we face in sharing that passionate love. And we're going to talk about how to cultivate that passion.

So God's passionate love, obstacles we face, sharing that love, and then how to cultivate that passion. Before we get into that, I'm going to pray.

We're waiting on you, Holy Spirit.

[3 : 34] Even as you are more present here than we are, we still expect you. We wait on you. We can do such marvelous things in our midst.

So we would ask, Holy Spirit, for you to unleash your power among us to encourage, to comfort, to convict. Holy Spirit, remind us that we are indeed sons and daughters of our Father.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen. All right. So after God frees his people, Israel, from 430 years of slavery in Egypt, he brings them to Mount Sinai.

This is in the book of Exodus. At Mount Sinai, God initiates a covenant with his people. And this covenant, this contract based on promises, is rooted in God's love for his people and what he has done for them.

He says, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. And then God gives them the ten words. These are ten commandments that are Israel's requirements for upholding their end of the covenant.

[4 : 51] We find that in Exodus chapter 20. And after that, he gives them further regulations which amplify and expand those ten words.

What it means, as we heard in the gospel reading, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Right? And the second is love your neighbors yourself. That's right.

We're going to focus this morning on verses 21 to 24 of chapter 22. We're going to hear about loving our neighbors as ourselves. I'd like to read it again for you.

And as I read, I'm going to ask you, what jumps out to you? What jumps out to you as I read this? How do you feel? Think about your feelings as you read and hear.

How do you feel as you read and hear the thing that jumps out at you? Okay? Ready? You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you are sojourners in the land of Egypt.

[5 : 53] You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn.

And I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows, and your children fatherless. What jumped out at you? And that's probably what jumped out at me.

For many of you, it was the part about God's wrath. Right? How did you feel reading that or hearing that? Uncomfortable?

Probably. Now, why did you feel that way? I bet one reason is that it doesn't square what you believe about God's character.

Even if you doubt God's existence, and I know there are some here that do that, and you are like really welcome here, Church of the Advent. Even if you were to doubt God's very existence, you believe that if there were a God, he would be a loving God.

[7 : 03] And love does not square with wrath. Well, when we think about it, anger is tied directly with love. You love something deeply, and when that something is threatened, you will rush with fury to defend it.

Any single folks here who own and love cats? You know what I mean. You really love your cat. Now, imagine dating someone who knew you loved cats, but they make terrible jokes about cats.

Terrible jokes. Like, the only good cat is a stuffed cat. Or, I love cats. They taste like chicken. Or, cats would really help me with my punting game. You know what I mean? I mean, you would pretty much end the relationship right there, wouldn't you?

Some of you have already decided to end your friendship with me. Just because of that. But you'd be disgusted. You'd be angry, even.

And that relationship right then and there. Parents, when your children are threatened, do you not get angry? I've told this story before.

[8 : 17] One of my children was on a Little League baseball team, and there'd been a lot of rain right before the game. And the right field was just a slab of mud.

And he was playing right field at the time. And towards the end of the game, we're up by one or two runs. Ball's hit to my son, and he misses it. It's fine. He misses it a lot.

So do other right fielders in Little League. So he turns around and starts to run. And he didn't realize that the ball immediately got stuck in the mud. He didn't see it. Partly because the ball's the same color as the mud.

Also because he's colorblind. So everything looks the same color of brown. He just zooms right past and keeps running and running and running. And the coach for the other team got really excited.

Keep going, home run, baby. And what I felt was my son's at my son's expense. At my son's expense. I felt like, I mean, he didn't know it, but it felt like he was taking advantage of, I don't know, my son's flaw.

[9 : 20] Something he had no control of. And the coaches got together to decide how we're going to rule this. Now, if you're a baseball fan, you know how to rule that, right? It's a what? Ground rule double. Am I right? Yeah?

No? Come on. This is the case I made with fury to this other coach after the game. Because he had called it a home run. Like, are you crazy?

So because of my love for my son, maybe because the parents brought a lot of alcohol to the game that day. But because of my love for my son, I went ballistic.

I went ballistic. Now, granted, my loves are disordered. And I make idols out of my children, as do a lot of parents. But still, you can see how anger and love can be connected.

And I'm like, I'm like, I'm going to do a lot of things. I'm going to do a lot of things. We passionately defend the things we love. The more we love them, the more furiously we defend them. And in Exodus 22, God is saying, I really, really, really love the foreigner.

[10 : 24] I really, really, really love the orphan. And the widow. And the poor.

I love them so much. How vulnerable are these people? Resident aliens at this time had no ability to own land. They had no kinship network to support them. Widows and orphans were especially at risk because they lacked the natural protection and inclusion that come from the family.

Widows and orphans had no legal status. Or rights. But far different from the legal codes of the cultures around them. And you can go online and look at them. Code of Hammurabi. The Middle Assyrian laws.

Israel was to extend care, protection, and inclusion to these vulnerable ones. So do you remember feeling uncomfortable reading this?

God is saying, pay attention. Pay attention to what I love. You cannot love me without loving them. You know I hate oppression. You were oppressed in Egypt.

[11 : 27] You know, see what I did to Egypt? I will come in and rescue those you oppressed in the exact same way. So my question to you is, do you love those that God loves?

This is a question for us as a church. Do we love those whom God loves? How much do we love them? Or differently, is your love for them perhaps merely intellectual?

Like you know you should love and you know why you should love. But you lack the passion, the drive to love them like you know you should. To love the vulnerable among us.

The refugee, the immigrant, the disadvantaged. Children living in violent environments. Those spending their final days and months in a nursing home completely forgotten.

So we know the destination, right? We know what we should do. So how do we get there?

[12 : 35] Now, two Sundays ago, the missions committee met together. We did an exercise. We thought, what would be the ideal outcome of a missions committee at Church of the Advent?

Of a vibrant missions ministry at our church? And then we asked the question, how do we get there? And Kat Bryant, she led our discussion.

She had us draw islands and rocks and boats. And a lot of us agreed that one of these obstacles to getting to where we wanted to go is apathy. And we usually put them on rocks.

But apathy isn't a rock, is it? Apathy is a vast expanse of sun-beaten, windless sea.

It's not a rock to dodge. Having apathy feels like we're stuck in that expanse on our sailboats. The sun beating down on us, draining our energy.

[13 : 41] While our sails hang limp. Our boats are pointed in the right direction. We know where to go. But we lack the passion, energy, and dynamism to get there.

There's a disconnect between our head and our hearts and our hands. Now, I think this describes the majority of us. Because we are all products of our culture.

And we live in an apathetic culture. One that's full of distractions. It's not that we never get excited or passionate. But our hearts are alive to the things that don't matter.

And numb to the things that do. Like, I don't know about you. But in season three of Lost, I stood up out of my chair and say, J.J. Abrams, how dare you kill Mr. Echo?

He was the best. He was my favorite. He was only on for like a season. How dare you do this? My wife was there. It startled her. The next day, I found out an older lady from my home church had passed away.

[14 : 46] And I thought, eh, it's a shame. I'm not proud of that. I wasn't proud of it. I realized at the time, like, there is a big disconnect between what I should feel passionate about and what I don't.

The theologian Uche Anasur puts it this way. We live in a Seinfeldian society. Our culture is a story about nothing.

We make a big deal out of trivial things and are indifferent to the larger important things. Sounds like any episode or any season of Seinfeld, right? Sure, we'll get enraged at something unjust we see on the Internet, but that's as far as we'll go to do something about it.

We care on some deep level, but we don't care enough to be moved. We know what the good is, but often do not find it very exciting or engaging. We might reflect the apathy that surrounds us.

What causes that apathy? Uche Anasur wrote a book called Overcoming Apathy, and it's really helpful. It was, like, Book of the Year last year at Christianity Today.

[16 : 02] Highly recommended. He identifies seven reasons or roots of apathy. There's doubt. Unresolved questions we have about God or our faith can keep us from engaging our spiritual life wholeheartedly.

Grief. Those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and a future for which they hope. Unresolved grief can leave us numb.

Triviality. We're bombarded by trivial information every day, all day, which can move us to stop caring altogether. Feelings of inadequacy.

We're constantly sizing ourselves up to others and finding ourselves lacking. And finding ourselves lacking can often discourage us from doing meaningful things.

A lack of discipline. Our minds zigzag through each day, set on all kinds of things that don't matter, instead of keeping our minds set ruthlessly on the Holy Spirit.

[17 : 07] Fragility. Our fear of getting hurt causes us to withdraw from people. And ministry. And things that matter. Lastly, a lack of purpose. Our daily activities feel directionless.

And we get carried by the winds of the day. If you're like me, you can name a few of those, right?

The good news is that in the gospel of Jesus, God forgives our apathy. Despite all the causes of apathy being links in a chain that keep us bound and enslaved to it, the gospel can set us free.

The Holy Spirit breathes new life and dynamism into our hearts. So how might that new life grow? How can passion and love for the vulnerable grow where there was once the barrenness of apathy?

How can we share God's love for those whom he loves? I'd like to suggest four things to cultivate in order to overcome apathy.

[18 : 18] Four things. The first is honesty. Cultivate honesty. This means confession. Find somebody, preferably a group of people, with whom you can be completely honest.

People with whom you can completely be vulnerable and find grace. Forgiveness and acceptance. This is how God transforms his people.

James 5.16 says, Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. It's natural, I think, to be wary of confessing our sins and shortcomings because we know that to be completely known and then rejected or condemned is terrifying, right?

But to be completely loved without being completely known really isn't true love at all, is it? Superficial love. But to be completely known and completely loved is what every single human being craves.

We crave connection. But deep connection doesn't happen until our faults and flaws are in full view. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, Those who remain alone with their evil are left utterly alone.

[19 : 48] The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. Sin wants to remain unknown, but sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power.

If we truly want to come alive to God and his love for the vulnerable, we must be completely honest before others. Being partially honest actually hurts.

It doesn't help. A study found that those who only partially confess their faults feel worse than those who fully confess or don't confess at all. If in our honesty, we find ourselves concealing things out of a concern for self-protection, we only end up hurting ourselves.

The road to renewal begins with honesty, with confession. Again, the author and theologian, Uche Anazor, writes, In the case of apathy, confess your indifference to God, but also confess how you are guilty of immersing yourself in the trivial.

Confess your doubts, your lack of hope, your lack of discipline. In other words, confess your sinful disposition and the things that contribute to it, such as bad habits. Generic confession is usually not really confession.

[21 : 06] In the case of apathy, ah, here we go, I have to bring my specific contributions to my malaise into the light in order to experience forgiveness and healing. And in enduring the pain of confessing to another, I'm experiencing the discomfort I should be feeling for a holy God.

But I'm also experiencing, through the other person, the mercy of a loving God. Now, one way to find such people at Advent is to join a core group.

Some core groups aren't designed to be places of complete openness, that's okay, but core groups are doorways into relationships with whom you can have honest conversations like this.

And if you're really struggling to muster the courage to confess to others, you can confess to a pastor. Yes, Anglicans also have a right of confession. As a matter of fact, in the season of Lent in 2024, we will be highly encouraging it to come to a pastor and confess.

We'll be doing our best to make it possible for everyone to participate in it. It's going to be awesome. So to overcome apathy, we can cultivate honesty.

[22 : 25] Second, we can also cultivate rest. Living, working, and perhaps raising a family in D.C. is an inherently frenetic life.

Too often we exceed our limits. We don't say no to our screens. We fail to set solid boundaries.

Things cave into our calendar out of control. We avoid fencing off time of stillness and rest. It can only be from rest that a true love for the vulnerable can grow.

This was one of the original intents of the Sabbath. Justice and rest are hand in hand. It's in the fourth commandment in the book of Deuteronomy.

Here we read, six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work. You or your son or your daughter or your male servant or female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock or the sojourner who is within your gates that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

[23 : 48] You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

All right, we cultivate honesty, rest. And thirdly, we can cultivate sacrificial generosity. If you haven't heard Tommy's sermon last week on generosity, listen to it soon.

Find it online. Give it a listen. If you've already heard it, listen to it again. God says to his people, put me to the test. Put me to the test, says the Lord, and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

If you want to come alive to God's purposes in the world or to put it extremely crap, if you want to come alive to God's purposes in the world, to put it extremely crassly, crassly, it's not even a word.

English matrix? Yeah, good, thanks. In a crass way. You gotta put all your chips in, right? You gotta put all your chips in. Which means to be so generous that you can really feel it.

[25 : 04] Arthur Brooks looks to studies and sees that charity transforms givers, helping them become more humane. Charity also provides a sense of meaning by orienting life around a purpose outside ourselves.

One survey of Americans shows that those who give money to charity are 43% more likely to say they are very happy than non-givers. You see how generosity and coming out of apathy into life are linked?

In fact, non-givers are three and a half times more likely than givers to say they are not happy at all. Givers are 25% more likely than non-givers to say that their health is excellent or very good.

While non-givers are twice as likely to say that their health is poor or fair. In biblical categories, those willing to lose their life will gain it.

Those willing to lose their life, their life will gain it. That's Luke chapter nine. Now, before we move on, does it matter what charity I choose? I would say, yes, yes it does.

[26 : 12] If you're a part of Church of the Advent, this means you should be giving to Church of the Advent. The church is the primary means that God uses to bring about healing and renewal to the world through the authoritative proclamation of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The church is the body of Christ, the body with its hands and its feet going into the world to embrace and welcome the vulnerable. Last, cultivate affection.

Cultivate affection. Now, I'd suggest two ways of doing this. We're almost done. Two ways of cultivating affection. The first, choose to spend time with passionate people.

We're profoundly shaped by the company we keep. One group of people I'd recommend you spend time with is those who are in our refugee ministry. These folks are passionate about loving two particular families that our church has adopted.

Let me tell you how passionate they are, the things these people have done. They've supported the process for our families to secure permanent resident status in their new home country, United States. They organized rent support that you gave with your sacrificial generosity that prevented one of our families from being evicted.

[27 : 32] And that family said, were it not for your support, they would have gone back to Afghanistan. Our ministry recently persuaded this family's landlord.

They went directly to the landlord to allow them to move from their apartment with mold and flooding problems into a new, clean apartment. Our volunteers spent many hours buying a car for the mother of the other family.

Her husband is still overseas, so she's here alone. They helped her buy a car that opened up new employment and family opportunities. As a matter of fact, they helped her get her license. And for those of you who will someday be taking a teenager through the horrible process of, a terrifying process, getting them a license, you know, that's 60 hours that our people spent with this mother getting driving experience.

They helped negotiate a medical bill for an emergency that one child had. they were in the hole for tens of thousands of dollars.

Like, they took care of it. They advocated for this family and got it wiped clean. Lastly, they're organizing a coat drive and it's gonna take place next month, November 12th and 19th.

[28 : 54] They're looking for new and like new coats that can be brought here to worship where they will be collected and donated to refugee families. Now, do you hear how passionate they are? You should hang out and maybe help them.

Our refugee ministry's love for the stranger is infectious and they'd love you to join them. We also have folks that work with DC 127 and Little Lights.

These are ministries that support at-risk families and children. They'd love you to join them as well and catch their passion. The second way to cultivate affection, this is where we're closing, is to remember the profound truth that was found in Exodus 22, verse 21.

You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him for you are sojourners in the land of Egypt. God's people know firsthand what it means to be a foreigner.

They must access their collective memory of the bitter taste of oppression in Egypt and God's gracious deliverance from it. Their past experience shapes their present response towards outsiders.

[29 : 59] So this means placing ourselves within the story of God. Did you hear in the psalm that we read today about what it means to be immersed in Scripture?

It's like a tree by the streams of water. Being immersed in Scripture, remembering our own deliverance. This is the fuel for loving as God loves.

Brendan Manning writes, next slide, the recovery of passion begins with the recovery of my true self as the beloved.

Can we read that together? The recovery of passion begins with the recovery of my true self as the beloved. Beloved, you were at one time strangers and aliens.

Without hope, without help, until God called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. More than just strangers and foreigners, you were declared rebels, adversaries of God, fully deserving of His wrath.

[31 : 14] But God shows His love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. since therefore, this is Romans 5, since therefore we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. And so now, instead of being orphans, the Father has adopted you.

And you are His sons and His daughters. Are you ready to emerge from apathy into passion? Do you want to grow in your love for the vulnerable?

Do you want to grow in your love? Do you want to grow? Confess. Rest. Give.

I know that you are beloved. And in knowing the love of God, experience the wind of the Holy Spirit filling your sails.

[32 : 24] In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Holy Spirit, this is what we ask. For you to fill the wind in our sails.

For you to move us and shake us. Lord, give us a deep love for the vulnerable around us, for those within our congregation, for those without.

Help us to remember how much you love us. Lord, as we come to this table, we receive the bread and the wine, we taste it. Remind us of the grace you're filling us with.

Remind us that we are sons and daughters. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.