

God love us | Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25 | LUMC | Dec 18, 2022

Dear Church family and friends: We are in the last week of Advent. This week God wants us to remember that he loves us more than we know or can experience. The Advent season began with the sign of hope that follows repentance and recommitment to listening and serving the saving God. People of hope are filled with peace and joyful gratitude for what God has done in their lives. The fourth candle reminds us to delight in God's love; we promise to recognize that love—God is with us—and give out the same love to others.

Love is a term with many definitions. Most of them arise from an individual's cultural teachings or Christian faith. People are free to define love as expressed to themselves, to others, or to God. Often the love people express has strings attached, that is conditioned to certain circumstances. This love may not meet God's standards because people want to control the level of their love toward God. A person's Love may be highly influenced by a person's will. A person decides who to love, how to love. A person controls how his or her love flows out and where it goes. Such people control their destiny. Those people's conditional love is contrary to God's expression of love

God expresses love toward humankind freely, and people are supposed to respond to his love with no conditions. However, in ancient times some people put God to the test, and God was patient enough to explore the test answers with them. Moses initially refused the call to free the Israelites. He felt that his twisted tongue would be a hindrance. So, God called on Aaron to interpret for Moses. When God called on Gideon to be a Judge of Israel, Gideon tested God by asking rain to fall on an item, and God brought rain and dew and the item was full of water.¹ These people wanted a miracle to show it was loving God calling and defining the roles they were being called to undertake. When God express love and people respond positively, God can assign those loved some responsibilities.

On the other hand, we get entangled by our own pride and fail to recall that God oversees love because we are God's creatures. We belong to God with all we are and have, including our intellect and will. We must let God control where his love is channeled and how it goes out, whether toward God or toward others. We believe that God's love is purely dependent on God's terms. When God loves us, we receive this love positively and listen to God's directions on what to do with this love because he controls our destiny.

We can emulate Mary's example.

When God decided to save humanity from its own inflicted sinful wounds, God sent an angel to Mary to inform her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Mary was informed this child would save the people from their sins. Though Mary was taught in her culture not to accept anything without questioning, she did not doubt God. Nor did she resist; she agreed to carry the baby Jesus.

¹ Judges 6:11-13; 6: 14-16; 6:17-18

We were reminded last week that Mary's culture abhorred pregnancy out of wedlock, yet she ignored the cultural canons to adhere to God's promise. God loved Mary and chose her among all women to bear the Savior. Mary loved God in return and took him at his word! Mary did not let her human flesh (fear) override God's love. She relied on God's promises even though what the angel told her about her conception a diehard cultural conservative would denounce it at first hearing. She did not allow her cultural teachings to take precedence. Mary believed God and knew that the loving God would not let her down. Though overwhelmed with fear from time to time, Mary knew a loving God would not allow the cultural conservatives to threaten her with death, or even kill her. Despite being in the presence of God, she also played her part. She stayed away from trouble, and she did not expose herself to threatening situations; she knew the risks of a mob uprising.

Today's scripture selection also informs us that ancient women's security depended on men. Joseph, a righteous man, had planned to divorce Mary "secretly". He did not want to expose her to public disgrace. When the angel came to him in a dream, Joseph reversed his mind and agreed to provide Mary's security saying, "She is my wife". This was to provide Mary's insurance coverage—security. I am sure Mary had sensed that her fiancé's behavior was changing, and she may have been troubled by it. Friends, we ought to trust our loving God even in dire circumstances because loving God can actually happen at the 11th hour, so to speak. Joseph's finalized emotional divorce informs us how friends can let friends down to preserve their own security, or how business partners can escape the business to save face, or how parents or children abandon each other in the midst of temptation. May Mary's courage be ours whenever or whatever we encounter in life. God is never on a safari when we face hardships in our lives, God is always with us—Immanuel.

Joseph, being from the line of David, was a conservative Jew who lived according to the Old Testament and the Talmud. At first Joseph felt humiliated by Mary and decided to abandon her but when God comes to him through an angel, Joseph responded calmly and accepted God's will in spite of his cultural teachings. He bore public chastisement and adopted the baby Jesus. When the voice of God come in your life, listen, and act.

The readings of this season remind us that in the reign of Jesus, women are included. Largely women are considered a vital part and parcel of modern society. In most parts of the world, women are equal to men. They work in most jobs that were once the sole province of men such as in the priesthood and the mechanical and construction industry. Women are perhaps the best painters. Women have started or maintained family companies and some maintaining households without men's presence. However, in some cultures a segment of women unfortunately remains in subservient roles, and wait to be told what to do, what to cook, when to visit friends or whether to be involved in family decisions. Not all women around the world have invoked the challenge and give in to those who use emotional and psychological

harassment. I know that when one has been demoralized for years, it is hard to overcome the subservient role.

Another lesson the reign of Christ ushered into the world is one of overcoming racial and tribal bias. Through Jesus Christ God invited the gentiles into his reign. This invitation was previously resisted by the pious Jews of Jesus' time. Gentiles were never allowed to enter the inner temple courts. There were inscriptions on the door leading to the inner courts warning the gentiles not to pass those doors or they would be punished by death.²

In the reign of Jesus these restrictive human rules are abolished, giving all God's people freedom to fully experience God's love. Jesus preached an inclusive gospel, and after his death, St Paul, with the support of other disciples, continued to invite the gentile world into the reign of Christ. It is unfortunate that after 2022 years of ministry the church of Christ in some parts of the world struggles with the issue of division. The modern Churches are often divided on the issue of gender, sexual orientation, tribe and race.

I am sure you are also witnesses to how so many churches in this country are unwilling to cross church beliefs. Churches have stereotyped each other as being either too conservative, moderate, liberal, loud, or too rigid, or being "God's frozen people". When my grandmother missed her childhood teachings, she would say, "If mother came and found you boiling milk, she would roll over in her grave". It is that true this unloving Christian practice grieves Jesus' and St Paul's spirits to the core. Why do we hold onto archaic ancient practices in these modern times? Do Christ's teaching not influence human lives? For the most part LUMC has made history having an African, a person of another language, culture, and race, as your pastor. That history however is made by those who believe God's plan is beyond their control and can promise God like Mary, Paul and Joseph did, to live in God's love. When that happens, they do so without manipulating his plan to fit their mold.

We are called this week to ponder on God's love, and how we can allow it into our hearts and let it flow freely to others. God's love is inclusive—it flows beyond where we cannot even imagine. Women, children, gay, and minorities in every culture are included in this love. The challenge today is to let that inclusive love thrive. Jesus is upon every soul and encourages this love to so exist without hindrance.

What God promises, God follows through. God never leaves those promises—and those promised—alone to face temptations because "God is with us". Amen

² St Paul was wrongly accused of facilitating gentiles to enter the inner courts. Acts 21:17-22:29