

“AN ADVENT ATTITUDE”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

preached on November 30, 2008

It has officially begun. The Christmas Rush! Like a row of huge, hulking NFL linemen, the season is down and set, poised to plow over us with all its demands, distractions, details, dilemmas, delights and duties. For merchants, it's a “make-or-break” time of year. The more exhausted and overworked they become, the better their business is doing. For teachers, it's the challenge of keeping a gaggle of fidgety children focused on their schoolwork while arranging some special programs and projects that will honor the season. For musicians and directors, it's a time for arranging frantic rehearsals, easing fragile egos and fulfilling dreams of fleeting fame. For pastors, it's a schedule that is suddenly tighter than ever, sermons that must be better than ever, services that are suddenly fuller than ever. For children, it's deciding what to put on a list, where to hang the decorations, and who will take them to the mall.

Are you prepared for all this? Is your master list ready with everything you will need to do over the next month? Before you start scribbling and scrabbling through your schedules and calendars, consider that each and every one of us should begin our list with the same item, an Advent Attitude - the Advent Attitude that Paul urges the Thessalonians to follow. Paul says that we are to “Abound in Love.”

A friend found Socrates eyeing merchandise in the marketplace. The friend asked why he was looking, since he never bought anything. Socrates said: “Because I am always amazed to see how many things there are that I don't need.” At Christmas, Christians need to develop an attitude problem. Often it seems as though our celebration of Christ's birth is being stolen from us by a consumer culture. Why don't Christians develop an attitude that asks, “What don't I need?” rather than “What do I want?” At Christmas, why don't Christians give off an attitude that celebrates wanting what we have rather than wanting to have more?

Whatever the nature of your business or your busy-ness, there is only one thing that we all must put on our “to prepare for Christmas list,” only one thing we all must “want,” one thing that we all need to “have,” and that is LOVE. Love is the essence of an Advent Attitude.

An attitude that “abounds in love.” What does that mean? What kind of love are we to abound with? When Paul urged the Thessalonians to “abound in love,” he was speaking to a community that had already had its capacity to love significantly challenged. With persecutions and suffering at the hands of the city's pagan officials, with condemnations from the Jewish synagogue and with the constant bickering and complaints within their own ranks, the loving nature of the Thessalonians was stretched and strained. And much of the congregation was so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. That is to say that they were so focused on the end times, the return of Christ, so focused on the future that they neglected the present. There was no sense in trying to improve anything on earth, to make things better, because Jesus would soon return and then all this would be gone. Rather than working for the kingdom, instead of carrying the kingdom into the world, they simply waited for the kingdom

to come. But Paul wrote that they were to “abound in love.” And if they would look on his life, as we are about to do, they would have seen at least three ways that we are expected to abound in love.

1. Love must **REBOUND**. Every good basketball team knows that rebounding is the cutting edge between defense and offense. Whichever team rebounds most successfully becomes the team in control of the ball. The team that rebounds becomes the offense. It can then go on the move and head toward the goal. Failure to rebound puts a team continually in a defensive posture, always forced to protect its basket from the other team's offense. We have to rebound with love.

Great rebounders take whatever comes their way. They hurl themselves at the ball, and take possession of it for the sake of the team. How good a rebounder are you? As Christians who are called to “abound in love,” we must take whatever hits us and rebound it with love.

Now considering the world we live in and the endangered status that love seems to have, there is a good chance that what will hit us won't be love. Since the economic meltdown in September we have repeatedly been hit with something, but it hasn't been love. But no matter what hits us, we must rebound with love. Jesus told us that anyone can love their friends. There is no trick to that. But we are called to love our enemies. We need to rebound with love. The Christian's challenge is to rebound love when we are hit with hate; to rebound love when we are jabbed with jealousy; to rebound love when we are pushed by pettiness; to rebound love when we are devastated by dishonesty; to rebound love when we are plowed down by prejudice.

The next time we find yourself in the midst of an almost riotous holiday shopping mob, try practicing your rebounding skills. Can we rebound with love to the surly, sour-faced, part-time store clerk who doesn't see and doesn't care that we are trying to be polite and easygoing? Can we rebound with love to the teacher who is going to assign us a 10-page paper to do over Christmas break? Can we rebound with love to the co-worker who takes credit for our work and takes advantage of our good nature? Can we rebound with love to the telemarketer who calls during the dinner hour? Can we rebound with love to the Conservatives, Liberals, Democrats, Republicans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, gang-bangers, Gen-Xers, Boomers and Boosters? Do we abound in that much love, that we can rebound with love?

2. **REDOUND** with love - It's not enough just to get the rebound. We've got to do something with the ball. Redounding love, especially toward one who has behaved unlovingly toward us, demands an explanation. People wonder why we would act in such a way. And so we must redound. We must get a result. To “redound” is to get a result, to have an effect, to expand and even to overflow. If we are to abound in love, it means that we are to be filled and overflowing with love.

Paul praised the Thessalonians because he saw their faith as part of a greater vision, part of the apostolic mission of the church. Thessalonika was a pagan area where many gods were worshiped and the behavior of the people was not particularly moral. It was a most important city that connected the east and the west, right on one of the major trade routes of the world, with many cargoes and many people traveling east or west. Not only was it a most important port, it also had a good measure of independence. Rome never had a base there. So in Thessalonika, you could get most anything you

wanted, and the whole city lived with an attitude that anything goes. It was Las Vegas, Amsterdam, San Francisco and Sodom and Gomorrah all mixed together. Yet even there, especially there, followers of Jesus took their stand to deliver the gospel in word and deed, as they stepped up and stepped out to take their place in this divine vision, this apostolic mission that included the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, the judges and the prophets, the 12 chosen disciples of Jesus and Paul himself.

But that was then. What about now? If we are to follow the example of Paul and the Thessalonians, if we are to “abound in love,” it means that we, too, must step forward into that line of faith and add our voices, to add our testimony to the great cloud of witnesses. It is not enough to know we are the recipients of God's love, that our future has been forever transformed and our past has been forever cleansed by the power and grace of Jesus. We must also redound, to be filled and overflowing with the abounding truth of love. To “abound in love,” we must make love known to the world through the embodiment of love. We must overflow with love that the whole world might be affected.

A most stirring indictment of the church was depicted by Charles Schultz many years ago. Snoopy is shivering out in a snowstorm beside an empty food dish. He was looking longingly, expectantly, toward the house. Lucy came out and said, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled!” And then she turned and went back into the house and slammed the door. In the last frame we see Snoopy looking toward the house, shivering and hungry and utterly confused.

It takes more than words to make the love of Christ known to the world. It takes action. Sharing this love that we have come to know should take the form of sacrifice and service. Sometimes we get so annoyed by those people who corner us on the street, or at a party, or in the middle of the workday to “share” with us either their failures or their faith. We are irritated because they are not sharing with us at all. They may be foisting. They may be dumping or unloading. They may even be exhorting. But they are not sharing. In the same way, Lucy didn't “share” anything with the poor, shivering Snoopy. She did not have to sacrifice any of her time, her money, her space, her heart, her feelings or her needs in order to make that speech.

To make the genuine love of Christ known, to proclaim that love to the world accurately, we must redound Christ's sacrificial nature in our own lives. We need to be so filled with love that it overflows our lives to touch the people around us. We have to be willing to sacrifice some of what we have, some part of our life, that the people around us might know, that they might feel, that they might experience the love and grace of God.

We redound with love when we volunteer our most precious commodity, that is time, to help clean up a neighborhood park, or make the commitment to regularly offer our time and talents to the Clothing Bank or Angel Food. Or there has been some talk about beginning a groups for young mothers, Mothers' Morning Out or Mothers of Pre-Schoolers, and we need people to give of their time and talents to make it happen. It is a work in love. When we do such things, we redound with love. We redound with love when we donate funds we have set aside to pamper ourselves but instead give them to a small, struggling mission. We redound with love when we give our favorite foods, or perhaps

some special goodies to a food bank, or maybe even diapers and formula, rather than the stuff in our pantry that we don't want anymore. We rebound with love when we turn off the computer and pick up our crying child, even though it will mean staying up late that night working in order to finish a job.

We rebound with love, we rebound with love, and then we

3. RESOUND with love. When something makes a lasting impact, when it lives in memory beyond the normal length of its days, when it reverberates beyond time and space, we say that it resounds. To resound something puts it on a grand scale. This may or may not be good news. We can speak of someone being a resounding success, or we can note that an event failed with a resounding thud. An echo resounds by repeating the same thing over and over again, while it grows fainter and less distinguishable with each repetition. But the view from a mountaintop resounds with a silence that grows and changes every time we stop and look and listen, and its strength is never diminished.

We have only to glance at the New Testament to determine how resounding were the effects of Paul's ministry and message. This apostle, who seemed to spend more time in prison than out, has managed to have his words and his testimonies, resound throughout the church for 2000 years. It is because Paul's words “abound with love” that they continue to resound with the spirit of truth as loudly today as they did when they were first delivered to the Thessalonians. They speak with eternal power because he spoke, lived, and acted in the eternal love and grace of God.

We can do that. We can have a resounding impact on our children, on our church, on our community when we “abound in love;” when we speak and act from within a life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Remember that the early church turned the world upside down. They made things happen because they saw the love of God in action. They felt the impact of God's love on their life. And they were so moved by that grace that they wanted to share that love with everyone they met. They shared love in word and in deed. Have we felt that love, that same love in our lives? Are we ready to share that love in word and deed with everyone we meet?

Today we begin the season of Advent, the beginning of the Christian year. It is a time when we look to the Lord coming to us with such love and compassion, coming to save us from sin and death, to give to us the opportunity to live life to the fullest. When the world threw hatred and violence at him, he rebounded in love. With a love that overflowed his heart and soul he rebounded in love. And through his death and resurrection he made a resounding statement that has changed our lives, and changed our world. The early church, abounded in love, went out and turned the whole world upside down. Now we, as the body of Christ, abounded in love, we have the chance to turn the world upside down again. That is why we are doing this service backwards, to make a point because when Christ comes, he turns our world upside down. And now that his amazing love has come upon us, has enveloped us, all we have to do is to allow that love to flow through us into the world around us, and turn it all upside down again; to let the world know that God has not forgotten them; that Christ is coming again, into our hearts, and into our lives, and into our world. All we have to do, is maintain an Advent Attitude, to abound in love. In your life, may it be so. Amen.