**Advent – Week 1
December 1, 2024**

**Agents of Overflowing Love**

**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*

*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

**<Prayer>**

Have you made your Christmas list? What's on the list?

We are thinking about being the agents of Christ in the world, centering our thoughts around this one phrase found in John 20:21, *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”* This morning, we want to particularly focus our thoughts on being agents of overflowing love.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he is asking God to do several things. He wants to see the Thessalonians again. He wants the Lord to make their love increase and overflow. And he wants their hearts to be strengthened.

Today, let’s center our thoughts on that second request. “*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”* There are two things he wants that are quite similar. Paul wants their love to increase ... that means their love is growing. And he also wants it to overflow. And it is not that the increase spills over and gives them a good feeling. It has an object ... overflowing for each other and everyone else. So, the point here is that we have a growing love that has an impact on other people – those around us (each other) and everyone else.

Here are a couple of quick questions to jump-start our thinking. First, is your love on the increase? And second, is it overflowing? Is the quality of your love such that it has a visible impact on others?

Most of us like to talk about love in terms of romance, or just the feeling of love. Anybody who has lived very long realizes the feeling part of love is wonderful, but the practical aspects of love are worked out in everyday life. Real love has demonstrations.

We learn this from God.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).*

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).*

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).*

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).*

This is Paul’s instruction to the Ephesian men: “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).* Love, real love, has practical dimensions to it.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)*

So, is your love on the increase? When you look back over the past few years, can you say with a good deal of certainty, “Love is on the increase!” And can you look at your life and say, “My love is overflowing.”

Jesus calls us to love, not simply those close to us. He calls us to love our enemies. Loving our enemies is difficult, but an increasing love will eventually get there. This is the pattern of Christ.

Paul wrote to the Colossians:

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (Colossians 1:21-22).*

The love of Jesus reached across to us when we were at odds with him. And that is the kind of people he calls us to be - people who reach across the divide with our enemies.

An increasing love will erode your prejudice. It will begin to still your hatred. It will show itself in radical generosity, care and compassion. The Beatles sang, “All You Need Is Love,” but that love is demonstrated in real action. It is the kind of action that causes a person to be other-centered.

That's why love and forgiveness go hand in hand. Because when you forgive someone, you are practically choosing not to hold their sin against you.

That's why love and generosity go hand in hand. Because when you are generous, you take from what is yours and give it to someone else.

That's why love and service go hand in hand. Because when you serve, you are giving up your time to give to someone else.

That is why love and patience go hand in hand. Because when you exercise patience, you are living with the real difficulty of waiting on the other person.

The way the love of Christ works in our lives should mean that the longer we walk with Him, the more “other-centered” we become.

If we knew of a woman who was living with a self-centered man but insisted that he did love her, we might call that into question. If all of life was about him, his desires, his dreams, and nothing about her was ever taken into consideration, we might say to her, “Wake up and smell the coffee. He doesn’t really love you. He loves what you do for him.”

If we knew believers who were all about themselves, never growing in love, never seeing signs of their love overflowing into action for those around them and their enemies, we might say, “Wake up and smell the coffee. You don't really love Jesus. You just love what Jesus does for you.”

Now, back to the questions. First, is your love on the increase? And second, is it overflowing?

Let's take Paul's definition of love and put it to these questions.

Am I more patient than I was five years ago? Is my patience overflowing with others?

Am I kinder than I was last year? Do my neighbors experience my kindness?

Do I have a decreasing tendency to envy? Do my friends describe me as one who lives with contentment?

Do I boast less? Am I known by others as a “quiet about myself” person?

Am I growing in humility? Do others around me notice me less?

Am I becoming less rude? Do I interrupt less?

Do I seek my own way less often? Do others feel at ease when I'm around? Do others sometimes feel like they are the center of my world?

Is my anger on the decrease? Do those around me notice that I lose my cool less often?

Do I have less of a desire for revenge? Do others feel like I don't hold things against them? Am I quicker to forgive?

Is it becoming more of my nature to rejoice over the right? Do I gain delight in seeing others succeed?

Am I more protective of others? Am I more able to put myself at risk for the sake of others?

Am I growing in my ability to trust? Do others feel trustworthy around me?

Am I more hopeful than I was 20 years ago? When I talk with other people, are they able to attach to the hope I have in Christ?

Am I more willing to hang in there in the tough times than I used to be? Is my desire to give up less and my drive to press on greater? Do others live in the blessing of my perseverance?

The bottom line is this. As I live with Christ as my Lord and Savior, am I becoming more like him? His nature is love, and it should become more of my nature all the time.

As the Father sent His only son Jesus into the world as a demonstration of His love, are we living with that same sense of being sent as Christ’s ambassadors to the world?

Perhaps as we walked through the practical demonstrations of overflowing love, one of them hit you right between the eyes. You might have said to yourself, “I’m lacking in love on that one.”

So, why not surrender to Jesus today? Why not make it a point of opening your heart to Jesus for His transforming power to work in and through you?