

“ADVENT CONSPIRACY (#3): LOVE ALL”

(Matthew 25:34-40)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-19-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional AND Contemp. Service:] Read Text (9:30, MSG; 11am NRSV): Matt. 25:34-40 & Pray.

2. For the last few weeks, we’ve been sharing in a series called Advent Conspiracy, unpacking several counter-cultural concepts that can help us re-think the meaning and practice of Christmas as we know it, so that it’s not the retail circus/stress factory that it often feels like.

A–We’ve talked about the fact that when we **SPEND LESS** on gifts of excess (things we and others don’t really need anyway), it frees us to use more of our resources on gifts that can *really* make a difference in the lives of others.

B–We’ve also learned that when we spend less on *things*, it encourages to **GIVE MORE** of *ourselves* to others in creative, relational ways (that don’t usually come from stores).

C–And then, today we’ll be discussing a third practice (illustrated both in today’s scripture and the original Christmas story) that can help us focus on what Christmas is really about: learning to **LOVE ALL**.

3. Now, at first glance we might think that “Loving All” is an obvious practice for the season.

A–After all, perhaps more than any other time of year, Christmas is a time for us to think about and celebrate the love we have for our family and friends, and to demonstrate that love through the gifts we give to each other, right?

B–Well, my observation has been that if we scratch beneath the surface of many of our popular Christmas celebrations, what we tend to find is a very narrow, self-centered definition and practice of “love.”

1–For example, it seems that “Christmas love” in much of today’s culture tends only to include people who we know and care for (like our family and friends), and those who look and think and act like *us*.

2–It’s not so much “*Love ALL*” but tends to instead be “*Love those who’re LIKE US.*”

C–Now, we don’t *mean* to do this – it’s not that we’re *intentionally* trying to be exclusive and selfish in our practice of love at Christmas. It’s just that human nature by itself doesn’t encourage us to get out of our comfort zone to include others who are different from us.

–II–

4. And yet, if we think carefully about the first Christmas story, we find something altogether opposite... the story of a God who showed His love by leaving *His* “comfort zone” to love people (us) who were *not* in His social circle.

A—As today’s scripture from Matthew 25 illustrates, it’s the story of a God who disguises himself as one of “the least of these” among us.

B—[STORY OF THE KING WHO BECAME A PEASANT]

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard once described Christmas through the story of a king whose power and wealth was known throughout the whole world. He had all that a man could ever want... except a loving wife to care for, and to care for him. Without a queen, his vast palace felt empty, and his rich heart felt hollow.

One day, though, while riding through the streets of a small village of his kingdom, he saw a beautiful peasant girl who was so lovely that the king’s heart was won over. More than anything else, he desired her as his wife. So, day after day, he’d ride by her house, just hoping to catch a glimpse of her for a moment in passing.

And soon he began wondering how he might go about winning her love. So he thought, “*I’ll draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me to become the queen of my land.*” But as he considered it, he realized that though she was his subject and would have to obey, he would never really know if he’d won her love, or if she was just being obedient.

So he thought to himself, “*I’ll call on her in person, dressing in my finest royal garb, wearing my diamond rings, silver sword, shiny black boots, and my most colorful tunic. I’ll sweep her off her feet with my wealth to become my bride.*” But as he pondered this idea, he knew that he’d always wonder whether she had married him for his riches.

Finally, though, he came up with an idea that he liked, and went to work on it. He discarded his royal robes, found some ragged clothes to wear, and went down into the village as a poor peasant. He found shelter there, and began to work and suffer as one of them. He made friends, and was eventually introduced to the beautiful woman. They courted for some time, until finally she agreed to be his wife. Then – and only then – did he reveal his true identity as the king who’d become a peasant so he could win her love.<sup>1</sup>

B—Well, as Kierkegaard tells it, this is exactly what God did for us that first Christmas – God (the King of the Universe) disguised himself and became a “poor peasant” (a human baby) in order to have a relationship with us and to win our love.

5. But remember that the phrase “poor peasant” (as I’m using it here) is *not* just a generic metaphor for “all humanity.”

A—No. Except for the Magi, all the characters in the biblical Christmas story were *literally* poor peasants: Mary; Joseph; the Shepherds – none of them had earthly wealth.<sup>2</sup>

B—And as such, they weren’t expecting God’s greatest gift to be given to *them* – the same can be said about the “*sheep/righteous persons*” in Jesus’ parable from today’s scripture: they weren’t expecting God’s favor.

C—And so, here’s the thing: **When people receive a gift from a someone they’re not expecting**, they do a double-take – **it gets their attention in a way that doesn’t happen when we give only to those who’re like us**, or who run in our social circles.

D—As one author put it, “*When you [and I] love people and they don’t expect it, it causes them to reexamine what’s going on in their lives.*”<sup>3</sup>

–III–

6. So you see, what’s counter-cultural about what I’m suggesting today is the fact that Christmas is really a time for us to “Love ALL” people around us, whether they’re *like* us or not.

A—You know, even though today’s scripture isn’t normally thought of as a “Christmas” reading, it’s message is really at the heart of the season – when you and I do tangible things to help “the least of these” among us (those who *aren’t* expecting our love or our gifts), Jesus takes it personally... just as if we’re doing it for *him*.

B—Pastor Rick McKinley says that “*As poor people who have met with the righteous wealth of God, it’s now our turn to model [God’s] generosity by sharing our wealth with those in need. Christmas is our chance to move closer to those in crisis,... to notice those who are normally ignored. In short, it is our turn to love as we have been loved.*”<sup>4</sup>

C—Think about the impact it would make in our world if we as Christ-followers started making Christmas not only about loving and giving to those we *already know and care for*, but if it were ALSO about loving and giving help to the “least of these” in our world – e.g., the homeless and poor (like Mary and Joseph); the “strangers” and those marginalized by society (like the Shepherds).<sup>5</sup>

7. You see, “*Loving All*” means not only including and being a part of the lives of those who look and think and act like us, but more importantly also those who are *different* from us – whether because of their politics, nationality, skin color, socio-economic background, or their theology or worship preference.

A—It means loving and praying for (and even helping) those whom we don’t like, and who may not like us.<sup>6</sup>

B—It means making the conscious choice to spend less money on retail gifts for *ourselves* (and perhaps even for our loved ones) so that we can share our financial resources more radically with those who *don’t* expect anything from us (and who, I might add, will probably *never* be able to pay us back).

C—And at it’s deepest level, “loving all” means more than just giving financial charity – No. It also means giving of *ourselves* in relational ways, not from a position of condescension or superiority, but from a sense of solidarity with others.

## -IV-

8. So, the challenge I want to make today is for each of us to be thinking about things that both we and our families can do to “LOVE ALL” – not just to *talk* about love, but to *practice* it with those who might be considered “the least of these,” starting this Christmas, but continuing into the new year, as well.

A–It might include things as simple as putting more change into a Salvation Army donation bucket, or catching up our financial giving to our church’s general fund which (among other things) provides help to needy families around the world, funding for new churches and ministries here in America, education for children in Africa, and eradication of third world diseases like malaria and HIV. <sup>7</sup>

B–And today, our practice of “loving all” might include visiting the tables in the Narthex after worship which highlight the work of three particular ministries supported by our church that give radical love for others: Kioni Generations School in Kenya; M.U.S.T. Ministries here in Marietta; and our own children’s ministry at Ft. Hill Housing Project.

C–After you get home, our practice of “loving all” might continue by checking out some of the websites listed in your bulletin and on my blog that can connect us with Christ-honoring causes that help the poor and needy here and around the world.

9. Whatever you choose, though, my prayer is that it’ll help you and those close to you to enter into an “*Advent Conspiracy*” where your actions begin to mirror those of Jesus not only by loving and giving to those who’re *like* you, but also to those who’re *not* – those who are the “least among us.”

A–Jesus’ life, you see, forever changed the practice of love, because though he was rich with God, at Christmas he left his riches to become human, to minister to and serve the poor, the forgotten, the overlooked, the marginalized, and the sick.

B–And his example challenges each us today to “LOVE ALL” in the same way – to join him in loving those who need love the most, and to make love more than just a good *intention*, but instead a way of living that makes a difference in our world.

10. [PRAY: “*O God, over 2000 years ago, you shared radical love with us by leaving the riches of your kingdom in heaven to come down to earth and become one of us, poor peasants though we were (and are). You showed us the meaning of ‘Loving All’ by feeding the hungry, helping the poor, and ministering to the sick and outcast. You gave life and hope to those who least expected it so could all understand the radical nature of divine love. And as your followers, you call each of us to mirror this kind of love in our words and inactions with others. This Christmas – and every day after – help us to show this same kind of radical love as we ‘Love All’ around us, and enable us to see your kingdom come on earth through our actions of love to and with ‘the least of these’ of your children. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*”]

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[For Bulletin Notes:] **CAUSES THAT PROMOTE RADICAL LOVE:**

Kioni Generations School (Meru, Kenya) – visit their table in the Narthex today  
 Fort Hill Children’s Ministry – visit their table in the Narthex today  
 M.U.S.T. Ministries – [www.mustministries.org](http://www.mustministries.org) – visit their table in the Narthex today  
 Stop Hunger Now – [www.stophungernow.org](http://www.stophungernow.org)  
 Action Ministries, Inc. – [www.actionministries.net](http://www.actionministries.net)  
 Society of St. Andrew – [www.endhungernow.org](http://www.endhungernow.org)  
 Imagine No Malaria – [www.imaginenomalaria.org](http://www.imaginenomalaria.org)  
 Heifer Project – [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)  
 Information on local church Apportionments (a portion meant for others) –  
[www.umcgiving.org](http://www.umcgiving.org)

Read more ideas for radical giving in article by Glenn Hanigan in the "Advent Conspiracy" resources found at [www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com](http://www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com)

[Article "Above Giving Generosity" by Glenn Hanigan, appearing in *The North Georgia Advocate*, newspaper of North Georgia United Methodism, Nov. 18, 2010 – the full article can be found in the "Advent Conspiracy" resources at [www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com](http://www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com)]

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**ENDNOTES:**

1. This story originally told by the Danish philosopher and pastor Søren Kierkegaard, cited in James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 303.
2. The authors of *Advent Conspiracy* have noted that “*The very first statement Jesus ever voiced about his concern for the poor, oppressed, marginalized people was when he cried out as one of them – eyes shut tight, mouth open wide, wailing, kicking... It was one of the most profound acts of solidarity... he could make... When God voted with his birth, he voted for the poor*” [Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder, *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 86-87].
3. Rick McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy VIDEO*, Session 4, “*Love All.*” In his book, McKinley explains that this insight is applicable to each of us, as well: “*The good news of the gospel is for all people, including us. We are all poor and blind and imprisoned. We are the ones who have been given this lavish gift of life with God, and now we are called to enter this broken world and love differently*” (McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy*, p. 92). And elsewhere, he reminds us that “*Jesus became poor for our sake. [He] entered our poverty so we would no longer be poor. The priceless gift of a restored relationship with God and others is now offered to those who could never afford it. The outrageous wealth of his righteousness is credited to those who don’t deserve it. To those of us who are poor [which is all of us!] this is very good news*” (McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy*, p. 85).
4. McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy*, p. 85.
5. “*At Christmas, one of the things that should distinguish a Christ-follower is a love that reaches out to the hungry and thirsty and sick and imprisoned... We cannot allow the broken and vulnerable to become invisible*” (McKinley, *Advent Conspiracy*, pp. 86-87).
6. In Luke 6:27-36, Jesus refers to this as “loving our enemies” (e.g., those who we don’t like, or who don’t like us, or with whom we don’t particularly get along).
7. All of these are through what we call our church’s “Apportionments” (a portion meant for others). Find out more about the seven categories of these gifts and funds and what they help support at [www.umcgiving.org](http://www.umcgiving.org).