

Year A, December 18, 2016
4 Advent
Christ Church, Mexia

Love is an often-used word. You hear people say all the time: I love your house, I love my car, I love the taste of... But I think what they are really saying is I like "whatever" very, very much. Love is only appropriately used regarding relationships.

I think Joseph really loved Mary. Let me explain. There were two steps to marriage in the 1st century – first, there was the betrothal, which lasted for one year and at the end of a successful year of engagement, the wedding was held. Then the two were married. If anything happened during the betrothal, say for example, you find out your intended is pregnant and you know for a fact it is not by you... Then there were two options under the Law of the day: 1) you could bring charges, such as adultery in this case, which if the person was found guilty lead to the death penalty, or 2) you could divorce privately by writing out a certificate of divorce in front of two witnesses and give it to her. The latter, we are told, is what Joseph was considering. Still Mary would have been an unwed, pregnant teenager which would have been problematic enough in that society, but less scandalous than a public trial and without the death penalty involved. Now maybe Joseph didn't want the scandal, but I prefer to think he chose this course out of love. Why? Because Joseph obviously loved God and therefore had love in his heart. He also knew that God was merciful and expected his followers to be merciful as a part of love. Joseph was righteous and heard God when God spoke to him. And through Joseph's no-nonsense, faithful response to God, God was able to work to implement God's plan for the salvation of the whole world. And love is required for that work.

Love puts others first. During this past year USMC Captain Jeff Kuss, a pilot for the Blue Angels, stayed with his disabled plane until it crashed to avoid hitting an apartment complex in Tennessee where many of others could have been killed or severely hurt. He was a husband and father of two. In the 1960's, Jonathan M. Daniels, a young student from an Episcopal seminary, stepped in front of a young black girl and took the shotgun blast meant for her from a county deputy to his chest. Her crime was to try to enter a store in Alabama and buy a Coca Cola. And in the past couple of weeks, Shish Restaurant in London announced that it was providing a free meal for the homeless and elderly on Christmas Day from 12-6 p.m., because no one should have to be alone or hungry then. Even more

remarkable is that the restaurant is apparently owned by Muslims. These are just a few examples of the kind of selfless love we experience from God. God loves us unconditionally, doing all that God can do to be reconciled to us, to be in a loving relationship with each of us.

John Henry Jowett writes in his *The Epistles of St. Peter* that true love is remarkable and inclusive. In his words: "There is love whose measure is that of an umbrella. There is love whose inclusiveness is that of a grand marquee. And there is love whose comprehension is that of the immeasurable sky. The aim of the New Testament is the conversion of the umbrella into a tent and the merging of the tent into the glorious canopy of the all-enfolding heavens. ... Push back the walls of family love until they include the neighbor; again, push back the walls until they include the stranger; again, push back the walls until they comprehend the foe." How beautiful to ponder.

And according to Br. James Koester, SSJE, "(f)alling in love is one of the most profoundly spiritual experiences a person can have. By falling in love we discover our capacity for selflessness. We experience what it means to entrust ourselves, our souls and bodies, to another. When we fall in love as God does, we too will ultimately "stretch out (our) arms of love on the hard wood of the cross," just as Jesus did."

This is the time of year when we celebrate the magical birth, when a transcendent and relatively unknown God became known to us. It is the precursor to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that has become our model for love and our salvation. So, that in that knowledge, we can imagine and feel hope, peace, joy and love in our lives.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.