“Increase Our Love”

1 Peter 4:7-11, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

November 27, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is the name given to the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and it is often described as a time of preparation. Each week in Advent this year I want to share a simple prayer with you. My hope is that you will pray this prayer often and that it will help you to experience the joy of the love of Christ as you prepare your heart for Christmas.

The prayer, or phrase, for today is “Increase Our Love.” It comes from 1 Thessalonians 3:12. “May the Lord *make your love increase* and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” Let me tell you a little bit about the backstory of this verse and the letter.

During one of his church planting journeys the Apostle Paul visited a city called Thessalonica. He preached in the synagogue there for about three weeks and had a good response. A number of Jews believed. But other Jews were angry. They stirred up a crowd and Paul and Silas had to sneak out of the city under the cover of darkness. (See Acts 17:1-9) As he traveled on Paul worried about the baby believers he had to leave so quickly. So sometime later he sent Timothy, one of his co-workers, back to Thessalonica to see how they were doing. Now Timothy has returned to Paul with good news. The church was strong and, for the most part, was holding firmly to the Truth. And here in chapter 3 Paul praises them and prays for them. And part of his prayer includes these words, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”

*Increase our love.* “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” says Jesus, “if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

In preparation for this message I’ve lived with this phrase for the past week or so. And I’ve tried to keep my eyes and ears open for what this might mean and for ways I might picture it for us this morning. As a result I have a couple stories to tell you. And I’ll tell you up front that what I want you to see in these stories is just how simple it can be to live out this prayer. I want us to see that the opportunities to experience this prayer, and it’s fruit, are often right in front of us in the simple gifts we offer to each other. So let me tell you a couple stories that spoke to me.

How many of you know the Food Network show *Chopped?* For those of you who aren’t familiar with it, *Chopped* is a cooking competition. There are four competitors, and they are usually highly trained and successful chefs or line cooks. The competition consists of three rounds, appetizer, entre, and dessert. What makes the show interesting is that for each round they are given a basket of four mystery ingredients. It’s usually some protein, like fish or chicken, a vegetable or starch, and then one or two off the wall things like gummy worms or peppermint candies. One of my favorite things that they gave them was *Chicken in a can*. They have around twenty minutes to make the dish. After each round the person who made the worst dish in the eyes of the judges is chopped. So three go on to the second round. They get another basket. Make another dish. Someone is chopped. Finally the last two make one more dish, dessert, and the winner gets $10,000.

OK, so I was watching a *Chopped* show one night this week. On this particular show the cooks were not professional chefs. They were just people who liked to cook. But they did share something in common. The first competitor was a nun. The second competitor was a priest. The third competitor was a protestant pastor. And, can you guess? The fourth competitor was a Rabbi! So if you were describing this particular episode of *Chopped* you could say, ‘A nun, a priest, a pastor and a Rabbi entered a cooking contest!’ It sounds like the start of a bad joke – or a good country song!

Now there is a reason I’m telling you this story. Really, there is. The Rabbi was an Orthodox Jew who kept Kosher. I didn’t know this, but since the Chopped kitchen wasn’t a kosher kitchen he could not taste his food. So several times in the first round, as he was making his appetizer, he took a small spoonful and asked the pastor next to him to taste it and tell him if it needed more salt. For a competition I thought that was very unusual. But she was very gracious. The first time, and second time, she tasted it she said, “More salt.” So each time he added a pinch more. When he asked her to taste his food for the third time, she still said it needed more salt. But this time he didn’t add any more salt. When the judges tasted his food, they liked it, but guess what they criticized him fore? *It needed more salt!*

Why tell this story? I mean other than it gave me the chance to say, ‘A nun, a Priest, a pastor and a Rabbi entered a cooking contest’ It was a competition. His competitors were under no obligation to taste his food. But the pastor did, and did so happily. Sometimes the answer to the prayer, ‘Increase our love,” is something just that simple. It’s just a tiny, tiny act of compassion, or tenderness. It’s letting go of the need to have the last word. It’s holding that snarky comment in, instead of letting it out, and so on. Often what it means to live with more love is right there, right in front of us; it’s just a simple act of generosity or kindness. We just have to want to see it. *Increase our love.*

Here’s another story. This one is just as simple, but it captures the impact of this prayer more powerfully. Earlier this week our Bishop, Gregory Palmer, sent out a Thanksgiving letter to the Conference. In his letter he spoke of Howard Thurman. I vaguely remembered the name, but not much else. So I looked him up. Howard Thurman was an African American pastor, educator, and theologian who was born in 1899 and died in 1981. He was an early advocate of Civil Rights, and the theology of non-violence, and was a key mentor of Martin Luther King Jr. Here’s what the Bishop wrote. “I am convinced that in a culture of consumption we sometimes miss the little things that make the big difference. All we have to do is look back over our lives, and we could recite a litany of seemingly small things and countless, unnamed people that, had they not been there, our lives would be dramatically different. In his autobiography *With Head and Heart*, Howard Thurman dedicates the book this way: “To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dreams sixty-five years ago.” Then the Bishop added, “If you want to read the story behind the dedication, it's on p. 24-25.”

Well, I did, I wanted to know the rest of the story, and so I bought the book. Here’s the story behind the dedication. Howard Thurman grew up in Florida and in his town there was no high school for African Americans. In fact there were only a couple in the whole state. So for most blacks, their education ended at 8th grade. But Howard’s mother found a town that had a high school for blacks, and a family that would take Howard in, in exchange for some work. So Howard borrowed an old trunk and packed his belongings. The trunk was missing its handle so he just wrapped it tightly with twine and headed to the railroad station. He bought his ticket, but when he went to check his trunk he was told that the trunk had to be shipped instead. Why? Well, in order to bring the trunk on the train it had to have a tag and, get this, *the tag had to be attached to the handle.* Well he didn’t have any more money and his trunk didn’t have a handle and the railroad agent wasn’t about to break the rules for young black kid.

Here’s what happened next. Howard writes, “I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out. Presently I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work shoes. My eyes crawled upward until I saw the man’s face. He was a black man, dressed in overalls and a denim cap. As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, “Boy, what in hell are you crying about?” Howard told him. Then the man said, “If you’re trying to get out of this \_\_\_\_\_ town to get an education, the least I can do is help you.” He paid for the trunk to be shipped. And Howard says he never saw the man again.

Remember the dedication to his autobiography? “To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dreams sixty-five years ago.”

*Increase our love.* Do you see how simple it can be? *Increase our love*. *Increase my love. Open my eyes to see and my ears to hear what You want to do in me and through me this week.* This is the prayer I’m inviting you to pray this week to prepare for Christmas and to experience the joy of Jesus. I don’t know what might happen. But God does. And He wants it to happen. I believe this is the sort of prayer God want us to pray. I believe He is delighted when we do. I believe He will use us. I’m sure that man at the railway station never knew who he helped that day and probably never gave it a second thought, or even imagined that it added up to something. But it did! God used that simple act of generosity and compassion and magnified it beyond anything we could imagine. And I choose to believe that while that kind man may not have known what that simple act meant at the time, he knows now. And when Howard Thurman died, there was a great reunion in heaven.

Are you willing to let God use you? Are you willing to pray this prayer and let Him draw something loving out of you this week that might not happen otherwise? *Increase our love*. *Increase my love.* Are you willing to let this prayer prepare your heart for Christmas – and beyond? Amen.