**“No Strings Attached” 12/23/18 Sue Black**

Today we light the candle of Love. It joins the candles of Hope, Peace and Joy on the evergreen circle and if we wanted to describe our life in Christ to someone, we couldn’t find four better words to start the conversation.

The concept of love has been distorted by today’s world. The media portrays people falling in and out of love before they even know each other very well. Looking at magazines and catalogs we decide we love a certain trend in clothes only to find out those skinny jeans really don’t look very good on us. We say we love a restaurant or vacation spot, coffee shop or department store but our loyalty changes if someplace better comes along or one of our favorite places disappoint us.

Love is a simple word but it has many meanings. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, there are at least six different words for love including *“Eros”* meaning physical or romantic love, *“Philia”* a love shared in deep bonds of friendshipand *“Agape”*, the type of love that we’d all like to give and receive. It’s a love that is unconditional, it isn’t earned and it doesn’t depend on another’s response. It’s the kind of love our Savior gives.

This morning’s scripture is Isaiah 43:1-13 on page 1127 of your pew Bible. It’s entitled, “*Israel’s Only Savior*.” Listen now for the Word of God.

*“But now, this is what the Lord says, He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in My sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the* east *and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back. Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name,
whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made.” Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of their gods foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right, so that others may hear and say, “It is true.” “You are My witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me no god was formed, nor will there be one after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed, I, and not some foreign god among you. You are My witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God. Yes, and from ancient days I am He. No one can deliver out of My hand. When I act, who can reverse it?”*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

God’s definition of love looks much different than the world’s imperfect view. God’s love started with Him. He chose us to be in a relationship for eternity. *“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)* God’s love is action, He loved us so much and so completely that He did something about our inability to love Him back. He gave us Jesus.

Have you ever noticed that if you smile at someone they will usually smile back? That also works with God. As a result of God moving within us, we respond back to Him. Obeying God and wanting to live a godly life becomes who we are and what we desire. When we say “I agape you, God!” our feelings go beyond gratitude or devotion. Agape is a selfless love that puts aside our desire to have our wants and needs met and instead it gives us new meaning and purpose: to spread God’s joy to others. In 1John we read, *“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 and sisters.” (1John 3:16)*

1Corinthians 13 is a scripture often read at weddings. As we listen to the words we are reminded that Christ asks us to strive for the kind of love that He has for us. *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, 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.” (1Corinthians 13:4-6)* Paul also reminds us in this chapter that good works, gifts, faith, anything that we have or that we do for the glory of God is meaningless without love.

There’s a story about love that’s often heard around Christmas time. It was written by an American writer O. Henry and published in 1905. I’m sure you’ve heard it before:

*“Della finished her crying and dried her tears. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day and she had been saving every penny she could for months but she only had one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy her husband Jim a gift. Jim worked hard but he earned only twenty dollars a week, which didn’t go far and expenses had been greater than she had expected. Many a happy hour she had spent planning to buy something nice for Jim for Christmas, something fine and rare, something close to being worthy of his love.*

*Now, Jim and Della had two possessions which they valued. One was Jim's gold time piece, the watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's long hair. When she let it down, it fell about her, shining like a brown waterfall. Her hair reached below her knees and made itself almost like a covering for her.*

*Sitting quietly in their house that Christmas Eve, Della suddenly had an idea. She quickly put on her coat and old brown hat and with a brightness in her eyes, she danced out the door and down the street. She stopped when she saw the sign that read: "Madame Sofronie. “Hair Goods of All Kinds." Della ran up the steps to the shop, out of breath.*

*"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della. "I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your hat off and let’s have a look." Down came the beautiful brown waterfall of hair. "Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the hair with an experienced hand. "Give it to me quick," said Della.*

*The next two hours went by as if they had wings. Della looked in all the stores to choose a gift for Jim. She found it at last. It surely had been made for him and no one else. It was a chain, simple round rings of silver. It was perfect for Jim's gold watch. It was like him, quiet and with great value. She gave the shopkeeper twenty-one dollars and she hurried home with the eighty-seven cents that was left.*

*Once home Della began to repair what was left of her hair, the hair had been ruined by her love and her desire to give a special gift. It was a very big job but within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny round curls of hair that made her look like a schoolboy. Della looked at herself in the glass mirror long and carefully. “If Jim does not kill me before he takes a second look at me," she said to herself, "he'll say I look like a little girl. But what else could I do with only a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"*

*At seven o'clock that night the coffee was ready and the pan on the back of the stove was hot and ready to cook the meat for dinner. Della held the silver chain in her hand and sat near the door. When she heard Jim’s step, Della whispered: "Please God, make him think I’m still beautiful." The door opened and Jim stepped in. He looked thin and she noticed he needed a new coat and some warm gloves. Jim stopped inside the door, his eyes fixed upon Della, there was an expression in them that she couldn’t read and it frightened her. It wasn’t anger or surprise or fear, these emotions she was prepared for. He simply looked at her with a strange expression on his face.*

*"Jim, my love," Della cried, "don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut and sold because I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a gift. My hair will grow long again. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let us be happy. Wait until you see what a beautiful gift I have for you.” “You’ve cut your hair?” asked Jim, as if he had not understood what she’d said. “Cut it and sold it,” said Della. “Do you not like me just as well? I am the same person without my hair, right?” Jim looked about the room as if he were looking for something. “You need not look for it,” said Della. “It is sold, I tell you, sold and gone. It’s Christmas Eve, be good to me, for it was cut for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered,” she went on with a sudden seriousness, “but nobody could ever count my love for you.”*

*Jim put his arms around Della. Then he took a package from his coat and placed it on the table. “Don’t make any mistake about me, Della,” he said. “I do not think there is any haircut that could make me love you any less. But if you will open that package you may see why you startled me at first.” Della quickly tore at the string and paper. There was a scream of joy and then tears and Jim hurried to comfort her.*

*For there were the combs, the special set of combs to hold her hair that Della had wanted ever since she saw them in a shop window. Beautiful combs made of shells, with jewels at the edge, just the color to wear in the beautiful hair that was no longer hers. They cost a lot of money, she knew, and her heart had wanted them without ever hoping to have them. And now, the beautiful combs were hers, but the hair that should have touched them was gone. Della held the combs to herself and soon she was able to look up with a smile and say, “My hair will grow fast, Jim!”*

*Then Della jumped up, Jim had not yet seen his beautiful gift. She happily held it out to him in her open hands. The silver chain seemed so bright. “Isn't it wonderful, Jim? I looked all over town to find it. You’ll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it." Instead, Jim just smiled. "Della, he said, "let’s put our Christmas gifts away for a while. You see, I sold my gold watch today to get the money to buy the set of combs for your hair. I love you, my sweet wife and there no strings attached.”*

Let us pray.