

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“Allergies to Love”
Matthew 1: 18 - 25
Pastor Jonathan

December 22, 2019
Advent IV

How many people have allergies in their families? Show of hands. How many people here personally have allergies? Any kind. Would you share with us what they are?

Now does anyone know someone who is allergic to God? You know, if you bring up spiritual things, they start to get uncomfortable, wheezy, start sneezing. I do. I knew them at school. I know them in my family.

What is a person to do in this season of love, when someone is allergic to love? What does God do with such a person? He certainly reassures us that love wins in the end. Jesus holds onto us better than we hold onto Him. (see John 6: 37-40)

What does an allergic person have to do to avoid allergies? First, they have to make sure the environmental context is free of the allergen. Full disclosure. Our youngest daughter has had the death allergy to peanuts, and some other lesser allergies. She has been in the hospital with her severe allergy and carried the epi-pen for decades.

So we got rid of our peanuts, peanut butter, peanut oil and other nuts and nut products to which she is allergic. We never had a problem with them. But she developed the allergy before she could talk. Someone gave her a peanut butter cookie at the coffee hour in 1991, and she started developing large red spots all over her body, before she could talk. So it was the real thing. And we took it seriously.

If you are allergic to love, what do you do? First of all, you probably don't know you have the allergy. You just start getting symptoms: stuffy nose, hard to breathe, and various symptoms you may not be able to interpret as an allergy, like the need to avoid the grasses during hay fever season. You name it. Mostly it is avoidance.

So how do we avoid love? We don't pay attention to it. It may be right there in our face, and we don't notice it. I'm reminding you that this is rarely a conscious process but rather an unconscious one. When someone does something nice for you, do you take it for granted or don't even notice it? Perhaps you don't verbalize gratitude or even acknowledgement of what has been done for you. It can be a

gift, common in this season, unacknowledged. It can be a kind word or encouragement, unnoticed or not received. It can be an act of service done to you or for you, unacknowledged or not seen as such. It can be a person giving you their time, a most precious commodity, and you don't see it as a gift, in fact, you might see it as the opposite. It can be physical touch, as little as a handshake or a pat on the shoulder, or a hug unnoticed or unacknowledged.

Love comes in so many forms. It is easy to put it off, or deny it, or be disrespectful to its intent, or rather the person offering it. But if we do have an allergy to love, we find ways to avoid it, or not risk it, or not enter into it. Do you know what I mean?

Love is tricky, complicated. But there is still a part of it that is simple and straightforward. That part is where we accept and receive it... or deny it and reject it.

And let me be clear. This may have much more to do with us as individuals than the other person or persons who are offering their love to us. That's why I'm using this allergy metaphor, and yet, something more than a metaphor.

Our reactivity to others, usually negative, sometimes positive, may have to do with this love allergy. We have learned, I have learned that receiving love is dangerous, risky, and may come with strings attached that I don't want.

We know it's that way with God. He wants us fully, not just part way...But I think we also know it is that way with others. Jesus wants the whole of who we are, not just to be a philosophical or theological reflection in our lives, not just someone who takes a little time on Sunday. Loving God means giving myself unconditionally to Him...which is the whole of losing my life in His direction and not turning back.

Loving others or rather receiving their love is complicated. It's complicated by how freely we have been loved in the past. It's complicated by the overlay of past relationships on current relationships. So it may be more common to have an allergy to love, than you might think. If that is so, how are you able to receive love, fully and unconditionally? Where are your allergies and resistances to love? That's my question this Christmas to you. My gift under your tree.

I'll be more vulnerable than this. I'm allergic to Christmas. Now hear me out. I'm not allergic to God becoming human, moving into the neighborhood and God

fulfilling His Triune plan to be one of us and save us from our sins, and give us the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is the voice of Jesus in our hearts and minds. I love the Christmas message. I love Christmas music. I really do.

But I am allergic to cultural Christmas, for example, to decorating. All I remember is fighting over decorations, the kind of tree to be chosen, the way to decorate it, with the large balls at the bottom and gradually the small balls at the top. And God help us, if an ornament or decoration was broken because of playing or rough housing, or having the cat or the dog do what pets do occasionally. The lights in the front of the house had to be just so. I love Christmas lights. They witness to the Light of the World. But I can't divorce in my heart and mind the arguments and the discomfort of hearing them. And likely, it wasn't as bad in my childhood, as what I am telling you now. But it is there. I had presents galore. I had everything materially grow up I could want. I was spoiled, if you will. But I didn't have the peace or the love within, like I craved. And of course, this reflection only comes five or so decades later...long after my parents might tell a different perspective on our celebrations, had they still been alive in this life.

So I want to be open to the good decorating and wonderful things that so many others enjoy in the season, but it is a mixed season for me. And I don't think I am alone in this.

Of course, the Good News is that God found a way to get to us and love us, beyond our resistances and allergies and to get to me beyond all my resistances and allergies. The passage we know so well from Matthew, chapter 1 teaches us that the God who had been in relationship with the Jewish people for centuries and millennia was finding a new way to get into relationship with not only his chosen people, but the whole world.

The Messiah had been prophesied for centuries, but now was going to turn up in Bethlehem, later Egypt, then in Nazareth. The promises to King David would all come true in Jesus, (His name in English) Yeshua (in Hebrew), Joshua (the translation of the Hebrew), Iesus (His name in Latin and Greek), the Christ, the anointed One, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But He would come as humbly as we all come into life, as vulnerably, with even greater risk, as the wise men and Herod's hate comes into the story.

But meanwhile Mary says "yes" to the unthinkable. God will have a baby. God will become a baby through her. And her husband to be, Joseph, also says "yes" after the same kind of miraculous angelic visit.

Note that Joseph listened to his dreams. He didn't say, "Yeah, I had too much pizza...that was a weird one with an angel in it..." He took it seriously that God could speak to him about the miraculous happening in Mary's life, and therefore in his life: "...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And you shall give him the name Jesus..." You can imagine everything that was going through his head. This can't be true. And yet any allergy he had to the revelation given by the angel of the Lord, was overcome. He was given the further promise that "he (Jesus) will save his people from their sins." And at this point in the story, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7: 14, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him "Immanuel," which means "God with us."

The presence of the Lord overcame Joseph's resistance and unbelief and his previous plan to put Mary away quietly, that is, break off the relationship because she had clearly been with another man. Now Joseph knew differently. And he respected Mary and the child within her for the term of the pregnancy, then had a large family with Mary from then on, according to Matthew 13:55, brothers: James, Joseph (Jr.), Simon and Judas as well as his sisters...

So we mustn't make Mary into the eternal virgin, because that is not from Scripture. We must respect the Holy Family, for properly bringing Jesus into this world, and their trust in God through incredible challenges; as many of us around the world, who are believers and followers of Jesus do know...

And we must continue to acknowledge where we are allergic to the Lord's love for us, and others, and where we are allergic to the love others show for us. And as He grants us this insight, we offer it back to Him, to overcome those allergies as He did with Mary and Joseph and so many others through Scripture.

In fact, His mission today continues to overcome allergies to love and many other conditions. He wants us to know Him, and show Him in His season and beyond. Praise God to the One who surprises us with love, and joy and peace and hope.

Let us pray.