



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Practicing the Highest Kind of Love

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Recently I was trying to book a flight online. I knew when I wanted to leave and return, as I was working around time constraints. I found exactly the right sequence of flights, but they were far more expensive than other options that were much less convenient. And then while I was rechecking all my options and ready to book the best one, the cost of the flights I decided to book went way up. I bet you've had that experience – the fare you've found goes up just when you decide to purchase it.

Fortunately, I've learned workarounds to avoid that fare increase – opening another browser or using a different computer or my phone. Still, it feels like some are taking advantage of us when the flights we want mysteriously increase as we go to book it.

It also amazes me that clergy routinely must deal with thieves impersonating members of the clergy and scamming parishioners for money, gift cards, and other costly things.

And now we're learning that some companies are looking at how they might use "individualized pricing," based on what they believe each of us individually will be willing and able to pay for their company's products and services.

It's as if some are lying in wait and ready to pounce in order to extract as much as they can from us.

Thank God that's not the way the Gospel of Jesus Christ works! Thank God that God always comes to us first and loves us unconditionally:

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1).

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

I have no concern that God is lying in wait for us, trying to see how we can be tripped up, or how God might try to get more out of us – other than yearning for us to return to his kingdom some measure of God's extravagant love already showered upon us.

In the Greek, the kind of love that God has for us is the word *agape* referring to a love not based on need or what one could get from someone else, but rather just because the person is. Christians believe this is the highest kind of love, and we are invited by God's grace to practice this kind of love in this life, even if we fall short of being able to do this all the time or as much as we would wish.

In this life, we will never be able to love fully as God loves, but by God's gracious work within and among us, we can begin to reflect that *agape* love – love that does not need or want anything in return. With God's grace and help, we can welcome and receive all others simply because they are also beloved children of God.

As the season of Lent approaches, we again this year have a valuable opportunity to take an inventory of our lives. I pray we will look honestly at any ways that we participate in and further systems that use people as a means to an end.

Let us start our inventory remembering that, like us, others are radically unique individuals made in the image of God.

Let us push back against those situations where we feel to our bones that we are being taken advantage of, or where we are taking advantage of others. Let us ensure all can claim their God-given dignity and act knowing all are loved unconditionally by God.

God bless you all, beautiful, wonderfully made children of God! And may the presence of the Holy Spirit be with you, support you as you offer mercy to others, and speak to your heart for reconciliation, healing, and with all actions motivated by pure love.