

Love

Life in the Spirit, Part 16

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend David B. Smith

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Isaiah 54:10-14

¹⁰For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you. ¹¹O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. ¹²I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones. ¹³All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children. ¹⁴In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you.

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our

sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Pray with me,

Come, O Holy Spirit.

come as Holy Fire and burn in us,
come as holy wind and cleans us within,
come as holy light and lead us in the darkness,
come as holy truth and dispel our ignorance
come as holy power and enable our weakness,
come as holy life and dwell in us.

Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,
until we are set free from the service of ourselves,
to be your servants in the world. Amen.¹

¹ Theology & Worship Unit (PCUSA & CPC), *Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox; Louisville, KY. 1993, 20.

When I was a junior in college, I had an opportunity to serve as a Pastoral Intern at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC. Like the Deacons here at BMPC, my fellow intern, William, and I took communion to members of the church who could no longer attend Sunday Services.

I will never forget our first communion delivery visit. It was late on a rainy Wednesday afternoon. We had already gotten lost twice by the time we finally found the house we were supposed to visit. We parked our supervisor's Prius on the street and I fumbled around in the back seat until I found the mini-communion set we had brought with us.

When we made our way up the path to the house, I was caught off-guard by a feeling that I would later recognize as a constant companion in pastoral ministry and perhaps in life more generally. I came to the uncomfortable conclusion, "I have no idea what I'm doing!" My mind started racing; I don't even know these people! How in the world am I supposed to support them as a pastor? I wonder if I have to act especially "saintly" when I present the bread and cup? Should I have practiced this before we came? (The answer to that is always yes, by the way) Are there special words I'm supposed to say?

Then, the second realization came; "Oh, no! I forgot the communion liturgy!" I glanced over at William, who must have come to the same realization. The look he returned seemed to say what I was thinking, "Yep, this is going to be embarrassing." Before we could regroup, the door was whisked open. Jack, our exuberant host, warmly welcomed us inside. After a lengthy conversation, the moment of truth finally arrived. It was time for the breaking of bread.

We laid out the pre-consecrated elements on the coffee table. We tried to exude an air of reverence along the way. Yet, before we could attempt our closest approximation of the liturgy we had heard countless times over the years, our host stopped us dead in our tracks.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. When I was a child, my grandfather took me to the local Presbyterian Church for worship every Sunday. In those days, most churches would not let children take communion until they had been Confirmed. On communion Sundays, the ushers delivered little pieces of bread on silver plates to each pew. When the plate came to my grandfather, he always took an extra piece of

bread. The tray full of little glass cups came around and he did the same thing; he took an extra cup.

When the ushers moved to the next pew, he would turn to me gently, as if he was trying to hide behind the pew in front of him. He took the little piece of bread, and the little cup, and placed it in my little hands. He looked into my expectant eyes and gave me his own version of the communion blessing. He said, “You don’t understand this now, but it means God loves you.”

There are many things about this faith we profess that are beyond our understanding, but this we know; we are loved and we are called to love by God. There is no shortage of biblical passages about love. Throughout its history, the church has had a lot to say on the subject of love. We’ve composed creeds & epistles and we’ve sung hymns. We’ve even written a few theses on the subject. We’ve talked about what love means, how we are called to love our neighbors, and about God’s love for each one of us. That the love of God is revealed for the world in Jesus of Nazareth is the foundational proposition, the central claim, of Christian theology.

The protestant Reformer, John Calvin, was known to warn his congregation against division and discord. Those who transcribed his sermons often jotted down a phrase that became one of his most consistent refrains, “When anyone attempts to separate faith from love, it is the same as though they attempted to take away heat and light from the sun.”²

For better or worse, we Christians can pontificate endlessly on the subject of love. Some might even say we have talked so much about love that it has lost its meaning; its potency; its power to effect change in our lives. Perhaps that is why it is so easy for people who profess the same faith to lambast one another on Facebook or Twitter after watching the morning news. Maybe that is why some of the more judicious among us have moved beyond the subject of love and started creating lists; lists of people whom God can and cannot love.

The culture we inhabit also has a lot to say about love. From poetry to pop songs, prosperity preachers to passionate partiers, everybody has their own love

² John Calvin, *Commentaries: Vol. XXII*. Trans by John Owen, Baker; Grand Rapids, MI. 2009, 239.

story to tell. We talk about lost love, crazy love, frustrated love and hopeless love. We talk about pretty much everything except *perfect* love. We say we love chocolate. We love our cars. If we're lucky, we may even say we love our jobs.

The word "love" provides the closest verbal approximation to the highest aim of human life, but we have sentimentalized it into oblivion. There is a paradox, an internal inconsistency, at the center of the way we talk about love. On the one hand, self-love is all that matters. Why strive for mutuality in an abundant world of imagined scarcity? Everyone is out for themselves anyway, why not join in? On the other hand, we are told that we will never be good enough to love ourselves as we are. We come to the conclusion that we might as well pacify our longing for meaning and significance by turning our love toward *things*. We redirect our loves away from their proper objects and toward the perishable thrills of the newest, biggest and best.

I see this phenomenon every day in my work as a youth minister. The young folks we love and serve are constantly pulled back and forth between opposing poles; "Love yourself more than anything else" and just as vehemently, another voice proclaims, "you can never be worthy of love as you are. So, get to work. Fix yourself. Change who you are to live up to the standards others have set for you." Even the most free-spirited among us have found ourselves caught up in this unholy paradox of shame and self-centered insecurity at one time or another.

The Beatles told us long ago, "all we need is love."³ We get that, but after everyone has said their piece, we are left with the question posed by yet another famous song, "what is love?"⁴ What does it look like in our lives? What does a love-shaped community look like in the world?

One could turn their attention to the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul penned the words that many of us have heard in our wedding ceremonies. Paul says, "Love is faithful, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." These words are as

³ The Beatles, *All you Need is Love*. Olympic Sound Studios, 1967.

⁴ Tony Hendrick (Dee Dee Halligan) & Nestor Alexander Haddaway, *What is Love?* Coconut Records, 1992.

beautiful as they are true, but I have always preferred to start with the First Epistle of John, because John starts at the beginning. John starts with God.

God is Love, the letter says. This is a statement that should not be distorted by saying the reverse; that love is God; That our understanding of what love looks like or should look like in the world is God. According to the text, we know that God is love, because we have seen God's love acted out in the cruciform work of Jesus the Christ. We believe that we are loved and called to love because God loved us into being. Beyond the reaches of time and space, God elected to love us no matter what. That is the promise of scripture. That is the strength behind faith's hope. God's commitment to love each and every one of us is the life's breath of our calling to love one another.

For Christians then, love is a gift. God's love is not dependent upon our feelings or whims. God loved us first and God will love us at the last.

If this account in 1st John is to be believed, the love of God is a radical, all-encompassing, kind of love. God's love is reckless love. God does not wait for a guaranteed return. God spends love on us like the prodigal spent his father's money.

Divinely gifted love is more than a sentimental feeling. It is about more than you and Jesus. Its bigger than your family and greater than this church. It even has the audacity to ignore national boundaries. This love is a fundamentally social reality. It is born out of relationship. The word "love" is given meaning when it is acted out in a community of people who embrace fellowship amidst difference. It is perfected in us when our love for one another reflects that of God in Jesus the Christ.

If you want to know what love looks like in action, find your way to a casserole blitz in the Ministries Center sometime. Come back next Sunday for Rally Day and greet one another after what has been for many a long summer apart. Talk to a young person who calls our congregation their spiritual home. Listen to their stories about how the relationships they have made in this place and how it is shaping them into the people they are becoming.

This love that shapes our lives, that forms our relationships, that makes us who we are as people of faith is so far beyond us that one could even call it a force

in history. It takes shape in the world when people unite their hearts in a cry for liberation and freedom. In his dynamite sermon at the most recent royal wedding, Bishop Michael Curry proclaimed the truth about God’s love to over 2 billion people. He said, “There is power in love. Don’t underestimate it. Don’t even over-sentimentalize it. There is power in love...” He keeps going, “When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay our swords and shields down by the riverside, and study war no more.”⁵

Love is a persistent contrarian to hate. The love of God revealed in human siblinghood assumes its victory over hate in eternity. Whenever hate shouts “NO”, love screams with all the defiance it can muster, “YES!” Love carries us beyond the reach of fear and division; it enables us to reach across party lines that we may embrace one another as children in the same human family. In a world full of shattered lives and broken people, divine love breaks out into a cry for redemption that is inspired by hope; Hope for a day when everyone has a place at the table; Hope in the promise that our lives can find their way back to wholeness through in the person who claimed us, called us and created as his own the one who claims us as his own.

When we abide in God we tend to get caught up in the crazy idea that love will win. We come to the audacious conclusion that love will win, because we have already seen love win in Jesus the Christ. Friends, we do not gather at this font every week because it’s pretty. We gather here because it reminds us of God’s covenant promise in Jesus Christ to be our God and for us to be God’s people. This promise is marked by water and sealed by love. We gather around this table because we are reminded that somehow, beyond our understanding, this humble symbol of Christian unity and thanksgiving makes real in our hearts the promise that God loves us. We come to the knowledge that in life and in death, and everywhere in-between, we are held in God’s precious love. We trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

⁵ Michael Curry, *The Power of Love*. Retrieval from: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/20/612798691/bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-of-the-power-of-love>

⁶ An allusion to the opening and closing lines of “A Brief Statement of Faith” in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I: The Book of Confessions*. Office of the General Assembly. 2004, 267-268.

The simple words that Jack's grandfather spoke over the little piece of bread and the little cup in childhood would shape the rest of his life. He went on to become a Presbyterian minister and an outspoken advocate for the greater inclusion of children and youth in the life of the church. After Jack had been in ministry for several years, he took a few weeks off of work to visit with his grandfather, whose dementia was beginning to take its toll. Jack held back tears as the duo sat together in the sanctuary of his hometown church. He looked into his grandfather's wondering eyes; searching for a trace of the force of nature he had always been. Then, the time for communion came. Jack took an extra piece of bread and a second little cup. Placing them in his grandfather's hands, he said, "You don't understand this now, but it means God loves you."

May you leave this place today with a commitment to be more intentional about the way you use the word love. May you be spared from the temptation to love only the *things* that people expect you to love. May you always remember that to be Christian is to recognize that you are loved and to respond to God's call upon your life by loving one another. Whenever you feel like you don't measure up (if that time hasn't come, it will); Whenever life throws your mistakes and failures in your face; When you have reached the end of your ability to understand, I pray that the promise of scripture might echo through the chambers of your heart. May this simple phrase be the first and the last that is spoken over your life; God loves you. God loves you. God loves you.