

Psalm 23 (CEB)

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff—they protect me. You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over! Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord's house as long as I live.

1 John 3:16-24

This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. But if someone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but refuses to help—how can the love of God dwell in a person like that? Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth. This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence. Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence in relationship to God. We receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments dwell in God and God dwells in them. This is how we know that he dwells in us, because of the Spirit he has given us.

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“Love is all you need,” or at least that's what John Lennon and Paul McCartney said. Pat Benatar believed that “love is a battlefield.” In the movie “Love Story,” the line “love means never having to say you're sorry” came into being to forever be ridiculed and mocked for being so absurd and wrong. And if that bit of misguided “wisdom” weren't bad enough, Tina Turner sang that love has nothing to do with it and is little more than a secondhand emotion. I think it's safe to say that when you seek to understand love, specifically romantic love, by using only what is produced by our culture, especially in music and film, though books aren't really any better, you're in for emotional whiplash. Because romantic love is so universally experienced it has become the most popular fodder for our media, and media usually gets it all wrong because it's spoken of from such an emotionally raw place – new love, unrequited love, or the pain of ended love, painful whether the end was brought by tragedy or bad acts. We tend to connect with those expressions that mirror our own experiences, thereby reinforcing our beliefs about love based on what we have felt ourselves. It's no wonder Taylor Swift is so popular; she sings about love from every conceivable angle, from those horrible breakups she's particularly famous for to the exhilaration of new love and more, so she's bound to connect with a pretty wide audience. But if we're only connecting to those expressions of love we have experienced ourselves, and if we only focus on the romantic kind of love, aren't we missing something really big? Because love is such an important part of our faith and our understanding of who God is, we need to have a much deeper knowledge of love. I know I've preached on love before, probably dozens of times in my 4.5 years here, but it's an important enough subject that we really can't hear enough about it, and you'll actually get a second part to this sermon next week; today is all about defining what love, from the perspective of our faith, is, and next week we'll talk about perfecting that love.

I've always thought that it was a fun coincidence that John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16 mirror each other so well. John 3:16 is, of course, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life;" and 1 John 3:16 is "This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." I think that 1 John actually expands what is said in the gospel of John so that we know what we should do with the good news of eternal life through God's love; it is only because of God's love in Jesus that we know what love is at all, and because that love has been so complete and wonderful, we're supposed to model it in our daily living. It sounds great, something that could help give our lives meaning and depth, but the author of 1 John also makes it seem very rigid and difficult. He says that if we see a sibling in Christ in need, and remember that siblings in Christ are literally everyone, and we do not help, we can't say that God's love dwells in us. I don't know about you, but such a black and white statement shakes me down to my soul because I'm afraid I can't live up to it, and if I can't live up to it, I feel as though I'm as good as lost. Does he really mean that every time we see someone panhandling at an intersection, for instance, and don't offer them the money they're asking for, we are actively denying God and God's love? It's hard to imagine that being true, not least of all because offering cash very rarely truly helps the deep needs of others, but it still feels like a bit of a gut punch every time I deny them, which is almost every single day. So then, what is love? How can we distinguish what is this real, transformative love and what is little more than a reflection of the absurdity our culture makes love out to be?

The first thing we need to do to decipher the true meaning of love is to look at the love we're giving and ask ourselves, "what's the purpose of my behavior?" If we want to offer someone care and support because we think it'll make us look good in the eyes of others, then guess what, that's not love. It doesn't mean that's a bad reason to offer kindness and grace, per se, we all regularly do things to endear ourselves to others, which can help strengthen our relationships, but love is something greater than that. Love is selfless. It isn't given to gain anything for us, it's given for the sake of itself. So, we can't expect anything in return for our actions – not respect, not a position, not reciprocal love, nothing at all. We know this is true because that's what Jesus himself modeled. This is, I think, the most difficult aspect of it all because it's so different from what we learn from our surroundings. We live in a culture where quid pro quo is so normal that we struggle to see how inappropriate it can be at times; not everything in our lives needs to be transactional. And that's especially true of love, because true love should seek to only benefit the one we direct the actions of our heart. Our culture would say it's worthless to do anything without expecting something in return, but we know better. The second thing to know is that love is active, not passive. Kind words are awfully nice, but love is performed, not just spoken. Too often words are empty, little more than platitudes, but love is full, going beyond speech to the realized. Again, we can turn to Jesus to know that this is true. He didn't simply offer kind words to those he encountered, he changed their physical experience with the world through actions of healing, feeding, and more. And when he taught, he always backed up his teaching with lived experience. And guess what, this is all we need to know; it's only these two things that make up love, at least according to John. Selfless action isn't exactly easy, but at least keeping up with the steps is – I think all of us can memorize them.

If love is selfless action for the good of others, how do we actually do it? This is the million-dollar question of not just our life, but of our entire faith. I won't give you the answer, of course, but I will give you what I believe to be the way to the answer. The only way we can answer the question of how to love with conviction is to believe more than anything else that there is nothing we can lose that is more valuable than the life of another, which includes our own life. And the way to believe that is to trust that God has given us something more valuable still – eternal life. When everything we have pales in comparison to what we are promised, nothing we have is worth holding on to, especially when we get the privilege of modeling the same selfless love that gave us that promise to begin with. And make no mistake, it is a privilege to give up what you have for the good of another. I understand that privilege has

been a hot button issue over the past several years, with people arguing over whether they really have it or not, and I won't wade into that fight from this pulpit because it's a fight that's beneath us. But when it comes to the realization that you have more than you need and are promised something greater than even your excess, then there's no question about it; we are people of privilege and using what we have to benefit another is nothing short of a gift. It is a gift that reminds us of what we are given, thus making it not a burden to offer it, but a joy.

It is only when we wrap our minds around this meaning of love as selfless action that we can really understand the prophetic words of those who have spoken of love from a space beyond romantic emotionalism. While some people think his words are reserved for weddings, Paul, in 1 Corinthians, was really talking about something far greater than romance when he said that love is patient and kind, not jealous, boastful, arrogant, or rude, doesn't seek anything for itself or put up with injustice, and doesn't fail. He was speaking of the exact same kind of love as presented in 1 John. When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend, he was, too. And so was Mr. Rogers when he said that love is as fragile as your tears and stronger than your fears. There are plenty of people who get the definition right, and we owe it to ourselves to listen to them. We need to understand this love because not only does it show us the gift of God in Christ, it also, as John says, reassures our hearts. The truth of the matter is our hearts are delicate organs, and I don't mean our physical hearts, though those are too. I mean the heart that guides our souls. This love given to us by God in Christ gives us all we need to know that not only are we enough, but God has ensured that what we give is also enough. When we feel like we don't have anything to give, or that what we give just isn't enough, it is God's love that shows us that our all is all that's needed and more. What is love? Love is trust in God's redemption, trust enough that we would give our all to show others the joy of that redemption. So, may God's love live in you that you may be transformed, and may God's love live through you that those who have lost sight of hope will regain it. May it be so. Amen.