

## **"FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: LOVE"**

Galatians 5:22-23; Matthew 5:43-46; 1 John 4:7-9, 16b-21

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The novelist Marilynne Robinson was asked "What single thing would make the world in general a better place?" Her answer? "Loving it more." (McLaren, p.204).

Love is a little word with a big agenda. My first and most difficult task as I thought about today's sermon was embracing the realization that I couldn't possibly say everything there is to say about love ... so I'd have to narrow it down. I'm sure you will all be relieved to know that!

What can we say about love?

We often hear that the word itself is overused. People (preachers, especially) love to lament about how we talk of loving pizza or strawberries, football or beach days or funny movies as readily as we speak about loving our children, our church, our fellow human beings, or God.

Sometimes they make a point of how the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, has different words for different kinds of love – family love, friendship, sexual or romantic love, universal or divine love, love for non-human objects. Those nuances can aid our understanding, but I have to say that those distinctions may be just a bit overstated. They aren't in fact all that hard and fast. And if you think about it, we have a bunch of such words in English also: affection, tenderness, passion, enjoyment, appreciation, caring, compassion. And yet... we come back to that little word, "love."

I think maybe we come back to it because we sense that all our loves – and the very impulse to love – are connected, and rooted in the same reality: the love God has for us and for all people, and for the world God made and everything in it.

Of course we can trivialize the word, over-sentimentalize it, twist and demean it. We can make it all about hearts and flowers and romance, reduce it to a vague feeling that translates into exactly nothing real, employ the word "love" when we mean "sex" or "attention," use it to refer to a momentary enthusiasm that will be replaced by something else tomorrow. We can promise love in order to manipulate or control; we can mistake acceptance of the unacceptable for love. We can love the wrong things, or the right things in the wrong proportions, or in an unhealthy way. We can turn love into idolatry. But we know, I think, that none of this is really "love," at least, not the love the Spirit of God aims to cultivate in us.

There is so much we can say about love.

The Bible says a lot about love:

Love is the sum of all the commandments.

Jesus is an expression of God's love for the world.

God's love for us never ends.

Our love of God is not real if it isn't accompanied by love of our fellow human beings.

Jesus told stories about the love of God, and about people who love.

He taught his friends to love one another, *and* their enemies.

He demonstrated love in his interactions with foreigners, people on the margins, imperfect people, needy people, spiritually hungry people.

His love was so great that it never wavered; even betrayal and the cruelty of the cross couldn't destroy it.

Love is at the heart of everything we believe in.

But even we Christians sometimes can succumb to the suspicion that love is nice but kind of nebulous, weak, naïve, ineffective, ok in its place ... but pretty much useless out there in the real world where you need street smarts and hard-headedness and a commitment to the bottom line and maybe weapons. Some days, the extent and intensity and ugliness of the hate we witness in our world makes us feel that maybe it's a force that can't be stopped.

So what I want to lift up most of all today is the strength of love.

Let me quote some words from the Rev. Martin Luther King's book of sermons which he called *Strength to Love*:

"...unarmed love is the most powerful force in the world." (p. 146)

"Love is the most durable power in the world." (p. 55)

"By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its nature love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power." (p. 52)

Love animates and guides all the other virtues, all the other gifts and commitments of the life of faith, all the other fruits of the Spirit's work in our lives. It's love that makes patience and service, faith and hope, leadership and witness real and human. Love gives context and purpose to our joy, worship, giving, and community.

Love makes us able to do hard things:

- Sacrifice a day off to deliver meals-on-wheels or sit with a grieving friend
- Give our children rules *and* space to be themselves
- Do a thousand and one unseen tasks gladly, for those who depend on us
- Make amends for wrongs; forgive those who wrong us.
- Defend the vulnerable and refuse to cooperate in or excuse harmful behavior.
- Remain in community when we don't all agree on everything.

- Risk our hearts: love makes us vulnerable, changes us, exposes us to grief and disappointment.

Love gives us the ability to look with eyes of compassion instead of judgement; to see *people* and not merely "issues; to know that "justice is what love looks like in public."

To love is to desire what is good for someone else. And for those who follow Jesus, that applies not only to those with whom we have personal relationships, not only to those we see as "our" people, or as "deserving," but *all* people, even our enemies.

Love is what enables us to make commitments and keep them,  
To work at a job or a passion with energy, integrity, and creativity,  
To make earthcare part of our lives,  
To be grateful for beauty and kindness, even when life is really difficult.

Nothing can get us to do such hard things like love can. Nothing can *sustain* us in doing such hard things like love can. Love is a powerful motivator. One of my favorite songs says "love can move mountains."

This is why I wonder about that notion that it's trivial to use the word love so often and so broadly. Maybe there is something to loving our work, our local park, our country, our church, a local mission ... or hockey, books, beaches, birds, theater, food, rock music, technology, movies, science, running, or whatever.

Sure, anything – anybody – can become an idol. But love is from God, and love of any good thing shares in that larger love.

Dostoevsky wrote: "Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love."  
(McLaren, p. 240)

When we love God's good gifts, we care for them; we care about how we use them. We want to make the activities and communities we love better, more humane, more truthful, more inclusive, more grace-filled and world-blessing. We want to do whatever it is we do in ways that express our love for God and for all God's people.

The more we practice love, the larger and more expansive love becomes. The more we participate in God's love for the world, the less we see borders and barriers; the more we see the face of Christ in our sisters and brothers: in the homeless couple begging on the street, the refugee at the border, the difficult child, the angry adult. We learn to love the wisdom and traditions of other cultures, new perspectives from writers or artists we first thought were strange, the passion of activists, the unique gifts of folks

who used to seem odd, the beauty of ordinary things, the value of plain old day-in, day-out faithfulness.

What can we do to make the world a better place? Love it more.

That's what God does. What God keeps doing with us. And what I said about the strength of love? This is where it comes from: from the strength of the love that made us, that holds us, that beckons us – the immense, unconditional, unending love of God... the steadfast love of the Lord, as the Psalmist says.

We can ignore it, refuse it, resist it, turn away. We – and do - can fail miserably in our efforts to understand and act on it. Sadly, we can even be obstacles to others' ability to perceive and receive it. But it'll still be there, calling to us.

I'm sure you are aware of the numerous studies involving both animals and human children that demonstrate the connection between being loved and being able to love. Those deprived of love, affection, and security, or whose only experience of love is highly conditional, very often develop little or no capacity to feel and express love for others. People who shut out love often lose some of their ability to show love.

The work of the Spirit is to help us lean into the love of God, because it's there that we begin to be able to love; it's there our lives are more and more shaped and animated by love.

Being loved – knowing you are loved, and feeling secure in that love – creates and nurtures the capacity for love. That's why the scriptures tell us that we are to love as God loved us. It's not a quid pro quo – something we have to do in return for something we've gotten. It's about who we *are*, who God's love has made us. It's about the depth of love in which we are held, and strength of the love formed in us, and the power of the love the Spirit of God deploys in us. That's why we can do some of that hard stuff. That's why we can love a lot of things and a lot of people. That's why we can always love a little bit more. That's why love knows no bounds.

That's why love is our superpower.

#### Resources:

*Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King, Jr.

*The Galapagos Islands: A Spiritual Journey* by Brian McLaren

*The Good and Beautiful God* and *The Good and Beautiful Life* by James Bryan Smith.