

To Know What Love Is – 2. Only Love Can Do That

Luke 6:27-28

May 19, 2024

Pastor Bethany Nelson

A few years ago, I worked with a Spiritual Director - her sole purpose in my life was to help me be mindful of where God was at work and present in my life. Whether talking about a painful situation when a friend was sick, or the hurried days of parenting small children, or the excitement around holidays... she would have me pause and ask, *Where is God in this moment for you?*

It's a simple question. But it's transformed my life.
And years later, its a question that continues to make an impact.

You see, I began to notice God in smaller places. Moments where I would have previously overlooked the Divine, or even *forgot* to look. I was encouraged to notice my relationship with God during mundane moments, bad ones, and the good. The noticing wasn't judgement, God might feel nearby. God might feel far away. But the asking helped me make intentional space to remember God keeps God's promise to be with me; my task is to notice.

This increase awareness means sometimes I've noticed God's presence when I'd rather avoid it — like when I'm angry or said something unkind. Instead of hiding my anger from God, the way the first people hid in the garden, I've learned to see God's presence. Sometimes, God supports my anger - reminding me those feelings can be fuel to move me to right a wrong. But other times, God brings calm. Reminding me to let go of anger and instead name the feelings underneath is, recognizing that I'm using anger to cover feelings of betrayal, fear, or let's be honest... that I'm merely tired or hungry.

I've noticed God in unexpected settings. Whether in the kindness of a nurse caring for my son, in the tender moments during a difficult conversation, or even in the warmth of a big hug. The thing is, God is active and present all around us all the time, if only we pause enough to notice.

But all of this is, in fact, Holy Spirit work. That tricky part of the Trinity that stirs, surprises, and encourages us. The Holy Spirit is somehow both life changing and easy to go unnoticed. Her voice is powerful but quiet. Her presence moves and shakes the entire world, and yet does so so softly, you might just think it's a cool breeze.

The same Spirit which moved over the waters at creation, moved through the people at Pentecost. But on that day, the Spirit's presence was not quiet. Wind rushed through the space, flames hovered about every head, and people from around the world could suddenly hear one another the same.

Today is Pentecost, the birth of the church and a sign of the Spirit being unleashed into the world: calling us to act in love, to united by love, and to be renewed again and again thru the love of Christ. Pentecost is a reminder that God is *with* us. That the Spirit is all around us: in big moments and small, in quiet ways and loud ones too, during easy seasons and difficult ones.

So, on this day of Pentecost... *Where do you sense God in this moment for you?
How might God be inviting you to notice, to reflect, and to act in love?*

One of my favorite exercises to help me notice God's presence is in breath work. Now I'm not talking about the regular inhaling and exhaling we all do to sustain life. Nor do I mean the exhilarating *out of breath* experience in a good workout. I'm talking about a way of intentional breathe. A Spirit-filled, God-filled breath. Try it with me would you?

And then, to quiet your mind and center your heart: imagine a square. Standing in one corner, inhale and imagine yourself moving toward the next corner of the square. Pause. Then exhale, as you breathe out, imagine yourself moving toward the next corner. Try it with me.

You see, what I love about this, is that when I am imagining my breath traveling the lines of this box - I can't *also* be thinking about the dishes to wash, the phone calls to make, the thing I'm anxious or disappointed about, or any number of lists constantly being created in my mind. All that I can think about is my breath. God. And with it, I notice an increased sense of calm, comfort, and peace. It's a prayer in it's own way. Breathing the name of God in every inhale and exhale.

In fact, as you might remember, the root words for Spirit in both Greek and Hebrew translate as wind, breath, spirit. Reminding us that the Spirit is the very breath of God - the wind that blows through our hair, the air we breathe. That from our very first moment of life, when we entered this world and took a big, big breath. To our very last, when breathing finally stops... every breath that we take is filled with God's Spirit.

Not only that, but the name of God *sounds* like breath. Less so in our English language. But in early languages, such as: Hebrew: *yahweh*, Aramaic: *Allah*, Greek: *Theos*.. among others, we hear the name of God in our very breath. We're breathe GOD in our lungs. We pray and speak the name of God in every inhale and exhale.

God's Spirit is something else like breath. It is something we *need* for survival, and yet something so easy to forget. Except for a few long months each winter - we cannot see our breath. We take countless breaths each day without consideration. Until it is raspy, or hard, or cold. Then, we take notice.

So too it is with the Spirit of God. Always swirling around us, usually unnoticed. Present, even when we lack mindfulness or cannot feel its presence.

God breathed over the waters and created life. This very same breath has been swirling around our atmosphere ever since: passing through the lungs of dinosaurs and early humans. Through philosophers and artists. musicians and prophets. Through the lungs of Moses, Esther, Mary, Jesus. Through modern prophets and preachers. Through you and me.

Isn't this amazing that the same breath used to create the world is alive in *your* lungs right this moment? God breathes. God creates. God sustains.

And on that first Pentecost moment, God's breath blew with a force of a great wind through the upper room. It burst into flames above the heads of everyone present, and lit a spark in their hearts. In this moment, the Spirit filled their lungs with such a presence - no one could deny God was at work.

They were united in their awareness and certainty of God. They were not made the same, but were made ONE. People from countries around the ancient world. People of diverse experiences and cultures. People who spoke different languages. People of varying ages and

genders. They became one. And the church grew that day from a small gathering of a hundred or so to more than three thousand. God's Spirit was at work infiltrating their lungs and hearts. It's as if God was saying... if you have life: breath! That very same breath moves in our midst. It is in the air we breathe. Filling your lungs this very moment.

We are believers in an *embodied* faith. Our Triune God - is not a distant deity, but one *with you*. Emmanuel: God with us. At Christmas, we celebrate that God took on flesh in Christ. But today on Pentecost, we rejoice that God's Spirit is breathed into *you*.

Don't you see it, friends? God is *with us*. God is *in us*. When we look around at our world and wonder, where is God in this holy, often messy world? God is in YOU.

One gift of Pentecost is the reminder to notice God at work within and around us. But another gift? Is the testimony that God has created and called the church to LOVE, not by being a people who are all the same, but by finding unity in our diversity. To celebrate that God is present in and through the whole body of Christ, which is beautiful, rich and diverse.

A simple glance around us shows us that God delights in diversity. Flowers of differing kinds, shapes, and colors. Plants which thrive in differing climates. Animals which make their living and reproducing in diverse manners. Yet all of them created and called good by God who created them.

So too is the church beautifully diverse, and the make up of its members are to be celebrated for the ways each are uniquely made in God's image. But all of us, are called to love. To make space for all persons to be known and belong. We are better together, as it is only together that we fully embody the rich and vast beauty of God.

In the United Methodist Church alone, we are a body of 10 million people with members around the world - not only in the United States, but in Africa, Asia, and Europe. We are not all the same, but we are one church, united in our love of God.

Our sermon series is titled, "TO KNOW WHAT LOVE IS: UNLOCKING GOD'S GREATEST GIFT" and on Pentecost, we experience the gift of God's love unlocked and unleashed into the world. But its not just generically unleashed, it is the specific and intentional offering of God's Spirit to YOU.

There's a story in Matthew's gospel where some ask Jesus, "*when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?*"

What does Jesus say? That is me. When YOU feed the hungry, set free captives, welcome refugees, visit the sick, and give to those in need. When YOU do these things, YOU are serving Christ, who lives in them. And, when you do these thing, you are embodying Christ, loving the world. We are not a people idly waiting for God to be at work in our world. We *are* the embodiment of Christ *in* the world. We are the one's, the signs of God's presence and love we are waiting for.

The Gospel of Luke - which is the precursor to the book of Acts, that tells the story of Pentecost- ends with Jesus saying:

“This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power.” — Luke 24:46-49

The story picks up in the book of Acts, where on this, the day of Pentecost, God fulfilled that promise through the gift of the Holy Spirit. God equipped and empowered you to be the hands, feet, voice, and presence of God in the world. We are made co-creators with God, called to transform the world by our words, our actions, and our love.

This is no simple task. Humanity has long created boxes and built walls to divide us- separating us by political ideologies, income discrepancies, man-made distinctions of nationalities and race, or divisions of age and gender. These divisions, which we quickly create stem from our fear, our desire for power, and our sin. This too, is nearly as old as creation itself.

But God calls us, and the Holy Spirit empowers us, not to be divided by our differences, but united in our diversity — seen collectively as reflections of God. Only together, can we begin to get a clear picture of who our God is.

Methodists have long embraced this invitation from God, by putting our faith into action. We believe that part of loving God *is* loving our neighbor. And we do that in innumerable ways.

At Messiah, we support the work of Imara, creating safe spaces for young moms and their children to grow and thrive. We do this by serving at Re-Member, where love looks like building beds, creating homes, and making relationships. We do this here, as we support food ministries at IOCP, ICA, and our own Totes for Hopes, showing our love by lessening food insecurity in our community.

And we put our faith into action through our worship, where we gather not as a people who are all the same, but as a people who are united in our love God. We embody God’s Spirit in our ongoing work of inclusion, of creation care, and supporting each generation uniquely with opportunities for faith growth and service. The work we do here matters, it is our way of witnessing God’s presence among us. All of this is Holy Spirit work, where we embody the goodness of Christ and unlock, unleash God’s love into the world.

These are just a few brief examples of the ways our love is unleashed into the world. A few examples of how we respond to God’s invitation to live fully as the body of Christ. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost has continued throughout the church ever since.

And it is here, in this room right now. Can you feel the power of God’s love among you? Do you notice the Spirit stirring within you? Breath in. Breath Out. And know God is *with* you. What will you do next?

Let us pray:

Holy Spirit. Nurturer, Comforter, Encourager. Fill us with your breathe. Ignite us by your fire. Give us confidence to know you are with us, wherever we go, calling us always to transform the world by your love and grace. Give us patience when we are discouraged. Give us creativity and courage to try again. Help us to celebrate the varied gifts among us, where our uniqueness - not our sameness - is celebrated and encouraged, knowing that each of us are filled by your Spirit. Be with us this day, O loving God, amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 19, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Gracious God, I have been created and shaped in your image, and formed by your love. Send your Spirit to surround and accompany me, that I might embody your love fully through my words, thoughts, and actions. Amen.

Monday, May 20

Scripture: John 15:26-16:14

“When the Companion comes, whom I will send from the Father—the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me. You will testify too, because you have been with me from the beginning.

I have said these things to you so that you won’t fall away. They will expel you from the synagogue. The time is coming when those who kill you will think that they are doing a service to God. They will do these things because they don’t know the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their time comes, you will remember that I told you about them. “I didn’t say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go away to the one who sent me. None of you ask me, ‘Where are you going?’ Yet because I have said these things to you, you are filled with sorrow. I assure you that it is better for you that I go away. If I don’t go away, the Companion won’t come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will show the world it was wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment. He will show the world it was wrong about sin because they don’t believe in me. He will show the world it was wrong about righteousness because I’m going to the Father and you won’t see me anymore. He will show the world it was wrong about judgment because this world’s ruler stands condemned.

“I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth. He won’t speak on his own, but will say whatever he hears and will proclaim to you what is to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and proclaim it to you.

Observation

Jesus spoke of an Advocate, or Companion, who would carry on his work after he left earth. The Holy Spirit would help lead Jesus’ people into truth, inspiring them to seek Jesus in the midst of hatred. Jesus reminded his followers that even after he left, they should not lose hope, but take comfort that the Holy Spirit was with them wherever they went. Jesus was direct with the disciples: “I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now” (John 16:12). However, the Holy Spirit would continue his work of teaching them (John 16:13).

Application

Even before Jesus died, he had provided for an active Companion to be with us until the end of time and space as we know it. Jesus has not forgotten or deserted us—he is constantly with us through the Holy Spirit. What word or phrase in today’s passage about the Holy Spirit speaks most to your heart? When have you most sensed Jesus’ presence with you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, guide me by your Spirit each day. I pray that I might have a teachable spirit to know more about you and your plans for this world. Thank you for loving me. Amen.

Tuesday, May 21

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young will see visions.

Your elders will dream dreams.

Even upon my servants, men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.

The sun will be changed into darkness,

and the moon will be changed into blood,

before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Observation

Pentecost was a Hebrew harvest festival, which came seven weeks after Passover. On this day of Pentecost, seven weeks after the Passover when Jesus died on the cross, God sent the Holy Spirit, marked by amazing signs. We recognize Pentecost as the birth of the church, and remember that the same Spirit which was unleashed on that day is present among us still.

Application

In Acts 1:4, Luke wrote that Jesus told his followers "not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, '... in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Acts 2 recorded how that promise came true. When have you needed to wait for God? Were you able to wait, or not? What did you learn through the experience?

Prayer

Loving God, just as your Spirit moved through the room on that first Pentecost, be alive in me today. Give me confidence and patience to trust that you are with me always, empowering and guiding me. Amen.

Wednesday, May 22

Scripture: Acts 2:22-36

“Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. David says about him,

*I foresaw that the Lord was always with me;
because he is at my right hand I won’t be shaken.*

*Therefore, my heart was glad
and my tongue rejoiced.*

*Moreover, my body will live in hope,
because you won’t abandon me to the grave,
nor permit your holy one to experience decay.*

*You have shown me the paths of life;
your presence will fill me with happiness.*

“Brothers and sisters, I can speak confidently about the patriarch David. He died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this very day. Because he was a prophet, he knew that God promised him with a solemn pledge to seat one of his descendants on his throne. Having seen this beforehand, David spoke about the resurrection of Christ, that *he wasn’t abandoned to the grave, nor did his body experience decay*. This Jesus God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact. He was exalted to God’s right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are seeing and hearing the results of his having done so. David didn’t ascend into heaven. Yet he says,

*The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right side,
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’*

“Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Observation

The dramatic signs (the sound of a mighty wind, “what seemed to be individual flames of fire,” and speaking in various languages) caught the attention of the large crowd of Pentecost worshippers. The Holy Spirit led Peter to boldly preach the saving news of Jesus’ victory over death, which had happened just 50 days earlier in that very city.

Application

In John 15:26, Jesus said the Holy Spirit “will testify about me.” And that’s what the Spirit did at Pentecost. Peter’s Spirit-inspired sermon said, “Listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs.” How have you sensed the Spirit testifying about Jesus to your heart? When you have a chance to share your experience with Jesus, how can you rely on the Spirit to make your sharing as effective as possible?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your power into my life, stirring me to live boldly for you. Amen.

Thursday, May 23

Scripture: Acts 2:37-47

When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites." With many other words he testified to them and encouraged them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Observation

The Holy Spirit's stirring coming at Pentecost had very specific, tangible, measurable results. It shaped Peter's preaching and touched so many hearts that it changed the disciples from a tiny, at-risk group to a movement of thousands. And it was not a one-day event—the Spirit's power kept right on changing lives for the better.

Application

Feeling deep inner conviction, the crowd asked Peter, "What should we do?" "Change your hearts and lives," he answered. Scholar William Barclay wrote, "When repentance comes something happens to the past. There is God's forgiveness for what lies behind ... When repentance comes something happens for the future. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and in that power, we can win battles we never thought to win and resist things which by ourselves we would have been powerless to resist." Have you claimed the Spirit's power to give you not only a fresh start from your past, but a future altered decisively for the better? What is one way you want to claim the Spirit's power to make God's impact on you and your world better in the year ahead?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, be at work in my life. Make me more aware of your presence and power, that I might tune my heart to sing God's grace today and always. Amen.

Friday, May 24**Scripture: Matthew 5:43-45**

"You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Observation

As Christ calls us into the world, accompanied by the Spirit, we are called to love as God loves. Here, Jesus reminds us to love *even* our enemies. Jesus called for a radical love that transcends the boundaries of our own communities and relationships. It's a love that extends to

those who have wronged us, challenging the "us vs. them" mentality that so easily and often divides people.

Application

From a transcript of Dr. King's Nov. 17, 1957, sermon "Loving Your Enemies" (Nov. 17, 1957): *"Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies."* *

How do Jesus' words in Matthew (and Dr. King's words about what Jesus taught) inspire you to embrace Jesus' radical form of love that reaches beyond your personal comfort? In today's polarized society, how can you actively use love to dismantle the "us vs. them" mentality and build bridges, even with personal or social "enemies"? Dr. King said Jesus was not a "utopian dreamer." Can love for enemies help create accountability and justice to remedy long-standing injustices?

Prayer

God, grant me the strength to embody radical love, trusting that love is a powerful force against division and evil. Guide me to actively seek to build bridges, challenge personal prejudices, and confront injustices with a living faith that transforms my heart. Amen.

* <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Saturday, May 25

Scripture: Mark 15:33-39

From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At three, Jesus cried out with a loud shout, *"Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani,"* which means, "My God, my God, why have you left me?" After hearing him, some standing there said, "Look! He's calling Elijah!" Someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, and put it on a pole. He offered it to Jesus to drink, saying, "Let's see if Elijah will come to take him down." But Jesus let out a loud cry and died. The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son."

Observation

At noon, Jesus took his final breath. The curtain was torn in two, and the Roman Centurion made a proclamation of faith. His words mark a confession, that Christ, not Caesar, is the Son of God. To us, it might seem an obvious conclusion. But to the centurion? This is a big and swift change in his worldview.

Application

From a transcript of Dr. King's sermon "Loving Your Enemies" (Nov. 17, 1957): *"A final reason I think Jesus says, 'Love your enemies' is this: love has within it a redemptive power. There is a power there that eventually transforms individuals" "I can see [Jesus] looking out at the Roman Empire with all of her fascinating and intricate military machinery.... I can hear him saying: 'I will not use this method. Neither will I hate the Roman Empire. I am just going to use love as my ammunition.'"**

What might have moved that centurion to see Jesus not as a Jewish enemy but God's son? What moves you to believe and testify to that same truth?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep my eyes open to see what the Roman centurion saw on that grim hillside outside Jerusalem. As I become more whole in your love, help me to see each person as your precious child. Amen.

* <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>