

The love of God is an absolute gift. We hear so often about how God's love saves us, keeps us together, nourishes us in mind, body, and spirit. But what does the love of God really look like? What does it feel like? How can we really lean on this love of God our creator in our everyday lives, in the here and now of our human experience and bodies?

The scripture readings we heard today provide lessons for us on how we experience love in our world, through God, through people, in our bodies. The common truth underlying all of these scriptures, and indeed all of our experiences of love, is God's choice to love us. God's choice to always choose us, to never abandon or forsake us, to give us the saving gift of his only Son Jesus Christ, all of these things are out of deep, great, creative love for us.

We first heard the very familiar, beautiful, and comforting words of 1 Corinthians 13. Who, when we think of scriptures about love, also first thinks of these words? (raise hand) Right, and beautifully so, because there are direct and actionable words about what love is and is not. Love is patient and kind. Love does not boast or keep a record of wrongs. Love never fails.

But what this scripture particularly teaches us is the importance of intimacy in love. We know only in part, and we prophesy only in part. We see through a mirror dimly, and then face to face. Each of these verses tells us about love, that we only know people in part when we decide to love them. And yet as time goes on, we start to learn more and more about them, the mirror between us becomes thinner and we start to know them on a deeper level. Love means not giving up on someone, and the 1 Corinthians 13 scripture tells us that this commitment to love another endures through the learning and the growing you do together. Though the scripture was originally written to instruct folks how to behave and love one another in community, these lessons about love run true for any relationship - our spouses, partners, kids, family, friends - the ability to grow together and know more about one another and have that growth and change encouraged and affirmed is an absolute gift that comes with love.

The psalm we read today teaches us two things about love. The first is that love often looks like the daily and repetitive actions we do to show the people around us that we love them. We cook and share meals together, share hugs and kisses and words of “I love you”, we drive them where they need to be and cheer them on when they need cheering. Any of these things alone without the commitment and feelings of love would probably get boring and disheartening. But out of love, we don’t give up on these daily and repetitive practices that show how much we care. Love can be found in the simple and reliable things we do for one another. And just as repeating the same words “for his steadfast love endures forever” may have gotten to be a bit much after 9 times, yet the promises of God’s love still ring true. The repetition of the psalmist’s words solidify the reality of God’s promise, and give us a constant reminder of God’s love that truly endures forever. Truly in all times and places, forever and ever, even beyond into God’s heavenly kingdom, God is truly steadfast in God’s love. And so we are steadfast in our love of the people around us too, as we learn this way of being from God.

The second thing we learn in this psalm is the love we find in community, especially as a worshipping community together. We repeated these words of God’s love together as one gathered body to show God our love for Him, for the ways God works in our world, and in thanksgiving for our community here together. Love is what joins a community together - a worshipping community joins people together in their shared desire to love God, to worship God, and love our neighbors as well. That love in community is powerful, and that sense of belonging is crucial to us feeling loved. What a gift that we experience love in the joy of community.

In the 1 John reading, we hear that indeed God is love. We learn that, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” When we make the choice to love someone else, we are therefore living with God in us. When we love one another, God’s love is perfected in us. We see God’s love reflected in those who love us, and this feeling of love is truly God living among us. Love underlies all things, all creation, all people. When we love, we know God.

And last but certainly not least, our Gospel story of Jesus raising Lazarus to new life. Many of us know what it is to grieve a loved one who has died. That initial hearing of the news that they have passed on changes us, physically, mentally, emotionally. It's a pit in our hearts, that sinks down to our stomachs and rises us like tears in our eyes. Jesus loved his friend Lazarus so dearly that Jesus felt these physical sensations at the news and indeed Jesus wept. We all weep when the ones we love pass away. But out of this great love, Jesus gives us the promise of hope in new life. He raises Lazarus from the dead in the promises of new life made possible by God. And so we too take comfort when we grieve that those we love will dwell in the love of God forever. Though they may not be physically here any more, their lives endure on in the communion of saints, in the company of Jesus, in God's heavenly kingdom. Though that pain of grieving can feel unbearable at times, that fear of loss is not reason enough to avoid love. Indeed, we know God when we love. Being able to be in loving relationship with one another is a gift from God that enriches and nourishes our lives endlessly. And thanks be to God for the gift to love, to know what it is to be loved, and for the steadfast love that endures forever, from the defeat of death on the cross and back to life again.

Love gives us the gift of growing with one another. We know love through the consistent, repetitive actions of people who love us, and the things we do for those we love. Love strengthens and joins us together in a worshipping community. God indeed is love, and love is perfected when we love one another. And the hardest part of love is coping with the deep grief and loss when one whom we love passes away. This grief does not stop us from loving but indeed makes us know how deeply we loved the people around us. Jesus gives us unending hope through his resurrection to new life, and for this hope, we give unending thanks. For the faith we have in the God whose steadfast love endures forever, we give unending thanks. And above all, for the love of God who endures all things, hopes all things, and bears all things, and believes all things, we truly give our thanks and praise. Amen.