

Multiplying Love 2024 Lenten Study

Discovering Love Again for the First Time

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Scripture Text: 1 John 4: 7-21

There they were gathered around the table. This would have been a familiar experience. Passover had its customs and rituals. They would have experienced them since childhood.

In their three years of traveling with Jesus, they would have been at table often—eating, laughing, listening to Jesus teach. It could have been a Passover like any other Passover.

But it wasn't. Something was shifting. Jesus knew what they did not. This would be the last time that they would be together in this way. Everything would soon be different.

Jesus reminded them of everything he had tried to instill in them over the last three years. The heart of this teaching is in John 13:34. The mark of a disciple is love.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, defined a Methodist as someone who has love filling the heart and governing their life. A Methodist is a person who wants to experience love and to love as Jesus loved more than anything in life. This is the holiness of heart and life that we aspire to, and it is the path to joy.

Paul Chilcote says the possibilities of how God's love can show up and how we can love others are endless. But he also says we are unable to sustain such love without discipline, practice, and teamwork. We perennially need to discover that love as if for the first time. We need to continually open ourselves to fresh experiences of God's love, and then actively reach out and connect with others, offering that love. We need to never let it get stale. And that means tending to the flame of love through discipline, practice, and teamwork.

Jesus was calling his disciples to this way of love and reminding that what it takes to live this love. It requires teamwork. He prays for their unity. He begs them to love one another.

He knows they will get it wrong. That is why it is a practice. Peter got it wrong that very night. After Jesus washes his feet and Peter pledges his loyalty, his fear gets the better of him, and he denies knowing Jesus. But who does Jesus seek out after his resurrection? Peter. What is the question he asks Peter? Do you love me? When Peter says yes, yes, yes! Jesus by saying: "Then I have a mission for you. Feed my sheep." The practice of love is rooted in forgiveness, both for when we get it wrong, and when others fall short.

And finally, Jesus reminds this love is a discipline. It is a choice we make over and over to serve one another. To choose love even when we don't feel loving. To trust that the Holy Spirit will be there just as Jesus promised and will give us what we need to keep his commandment to love.

Where are you today? Do you feel deeply connected to that sense of God's love, and confident in your ability to love others? There is much in our world that might cause one to focus on oneself or be overcome with despair. If you're feeling far from that sense of love pervading your life and our world, Chilcote invites us to reconnect and recommit to what he calls "movements of the Spirit." These are places and practices where the Holy Spirit can meet us, quicken our heart, and help us to discover love again as if for the first time. I want to highlight two of these.

The first is scripture. We can encounter God anew in the old, old story. It is a Living Word. A practice that I find especially helpful is *lectio divina*, which means "divine reading." It is amazing how fresh God's love and intention for you can feel when you come to scripture seeking to hear a word from God for you this day. *Lectio divina* can be done alone or in community. What we know as the Bible, was first a story told over and over for a community, so they could understand how they came to be the people of God and how they were to live. This story was then written down and preserved and again, it was for the community. Therefore, it is best interpreted and studied in community. We ask one another: What are you hearing? Does this fit with our understanding of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience?

The second movement I want to highlight is accountable discipleship. Wesley understood that growth in grace and love was only possible when we live out our faith in intimate communities of love. For the early Methodists, this was the class

meeting. Christianity was never meant to be a solo endeavor. Class meetings form us in our discipleship so that we can go out in witness and service to fulfill our mission to “offer Christ” in word and deed. We are to be God’s agent of love in the world, and when we are, love expands within and among us.

However the form of church may be changing, the mission of the church endures. This is what Jesus was seeking to instill in his disciples that night long ago. How they will be together has to change if the fullness of God’s love is going to be shared with the world. Jesus needed to let go of this life for what God could and would do through his death and resurrection, so that we would know a love so expansive that nothing could stop it. But the mission to love one another does not change. It is what God has made possible in Jesus Christ.

Today is Holy Thursday. It is on this day that we enter into the great mystery: for God so loved you, me, and the whole wide world, and God’s love was and is so deep, so wide, that God set aside divinity to become human, and then laid it all aside again, to enter into suffering and death, so that we know God’s love is stronger than death. God did this so that all who believe, would have a life. God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it.

This is an ancient truth, but this love of God for us, with us, in us—it is still real, happening today. May we once again discover love, the agape, servant love, the life-changing love of Jesus all over again, and may we share it with others. How will they know we are Jesus’ disciples? They will know us by our love.