

“Love”

Mark 12:29-31, 38-44, Ruth 1:16 & Psalm 71:20-21, 100:5

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our senses to your presence. Amen.

All four gospels command us to love God and love everyone. Some refer to the entire gospel of John as the gospel of love. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have Jesus saying: **Mark 12:29-31 NLT** (Parallels Luke 10:27, Matthew) **“The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”**

Luke illustrates the command to love with Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. Matthew shares a long teaching of Jesus where Jesus warns of the unloving blind guidance of religious leaders who are trying to close the door to the Kingdom of God on some people instead of lovingly welcoming everyone. Matthew concludes with Jesus saying God is like a hen who desires to gather all her chicks and protect everyone under her wings.

Mark contrasts the unloving ways of religious leaders with the loving ways of a widow. A reading from the gospel, the good news, of Mark. **Mark 12:38-44 NLT “Jesus taught: “Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces. And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets. Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be more severely punished.”** Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, **“I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on.”**

Many religious teachers got stuck in the letter of the law, stuck in preserving religious intuitions, instead of imagining God’s love healing everyone, including everyone, uniting everyone, joining God in creating a loving world. Their hearts curved in on themselves making them selfish. They did not believe in grace. They thought God only loved certain people who lived, believed, and thought like they did so they proclaimed their way as they only way, excluding others. They used the law to exploit others. They prayed but were not compassionate, not gracious, not generous, not serving, not loving. They were afraid to invite everyone into community to enjoy God’s love. They saw scarcity, fearful that if they shared there would not be enough, so they hoarded resources, creating a religious, political system that kept many poor so a few could have excessive resources.

What do you think of the statement: “Money cannot buy happiness, but generosity can.”? The religious leaders were not described as joyful people. Those who accepted grace and were gracious, those who served, those who loved, were described as enjoying abundant life.

The widow perceived the glory of a loving world. She imagined a world of love, serving and giving to bring heaven to earth. She did not become bitter, pessimistic or cynical. She was aware of the brokenness of religious institutions, yet gave generously because she believed that partnering with God and others who were passionate in growing their love, would enable the church to change, reform, be progressive, move forward, helping to usher in a loving world. She kept giving her offering to the

religious leaders who were repressing her, shamelessly cheating her, because she focused on the good that they were doing. She experienced God's grace, was gracious and knew that God's grace would wash away the sin of the religious leaders, the faults of the church, and enhance the goodness, beauty, and love. She kept giving of her time, even though the religious leaders told her she was not living right and others told her she was serving wrong. She kept serving believing that her gift would create a loving world. She kept giving of her talents even though they were often misused, taken for granted, and sometimes not even noticed believing her giving would create a loving world. She kept giving of her worship even when the format was discriminating, because she believed the church of the future would welcome everyone. She kept giving of her gratitude and joy refusing to get stuck in her poverty or grief. Her focus was love.

She believed in God's grace, regardless of all the pain and suffering that had happened to her, the corruption and exploitation going on in God's name, somehow, she knew God was setting things right. Therefore, she continued to invest in her community by giving her last two coins for the good of the whole. It is easy for one to look at how governments and religious institutions mismanage their resources and say: "I am going to hold back giving my money. I am going to quit serving." The widow inspires us to keep giving, to trust God to take all that we give, despite humanity's brokenness, God will make our gifts wonderful and glorious. God takes every instance of love and expands that love for eternity.

The religious leaders gave less and less, their love kept shrinking, until they saw only one way to live, to worship, to be faithful and that one way was their way. They believed that one group of people, one person, should tell everyone how to live. They arrogantly thought they knew all about God, that they knew God's will for everyone. They put the God who created the cosmos, the God who is beyond time, into a box, into a few laws, rules and rituals fooling themselves that their feeble works would save them instead of God's grace. So, they forced their way on others, condemning anyone who did not agree with them. Jesus said beware of these people. Jesus praised the giving of the widow, her ever-expanding love, joy, and service. Every loving gift you give sends ripples of love through the cosmos. God will multiply every one of your gifts for eternity. Imagine the glory of a loving world. Your stewardship brings heaven to earth.

Life is full of choices. We can choose to bring love, goodness and resurrection into our life and the world today. The Kingdom of God is near. Through our love, joy, and stewardship we can create with God a loving world for us and future generations. We can receive God's blessings, savor blessings, and bless others.

The Reformation saw the role of the church to be once reformed always reforming. We are on a journey creating a loving world. We have discovered and proclaim God's grace. We are reforming when we discover a new aspect of grace, a new way of love, a new way to worship, to serve, to rejoice, a new way to sing, paint, create, play, unite. We grow in love. We expand joy, peace, and harmony. We then can perceive even more aspects of grace, ever reforming.

As we journey, ever reforming, choosing compassionate listening enables us to hear the goodness in every person. As we journey, ever reforming, choosing to welcome with gracious hospitality every person regardless of status, wealth, race, religion, political party, orientation etc. creates one worldwide loving community that includes everyone. As we journey, ever reforming, choosing gratitude, joy and courageousness in creating beauty. As we journey, ever reforming, choose love.

Mark Brown wrote: "The church, the Body of Christ, is essentially progressive: we are making our way forward into God's vision for the New Earth." The church is once reformed, always reforming,

always expanding in love, service, hospitality and joy. The church is progressive. Imagining the glory of heaven. Strive to bring more and more of heaven to earth.

Our companion scripture from the Old Testament is Ruth. It is a story of tragedy, natural disasters, famine, untimely death, immigration, exploration, oppression and the power of love to create a future when all looked hopeless. Love is personified in Ruth, a foreign immigrant woman, the multi-great grandmother of Jesus, who proclaims that she will never abandon family. Ruth promises to love. Likewise, Jesus taught that everyone belongs to God's family, that no one will ever be abandoned. All will be loved for eternity. Jesus came to a broken world of violence to reveal the power of love to resurrect all.

A famine caused a desperate, starving family to immigrate where they could find work and food. Shortly after immigrating, all the men in the family died leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. Destitute, Naomi heard the famine was over in her homeland, so Naomi began traveling home. Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to abandon her and seek a better life. Ruth was resolute in love declaring. **Ruth 1:16 "Do not ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live."** Ruth was giving her mother-in-law the loving gift of presence. Ruth lovingly cared for Naomi reminding her, you are not alone, you are loved, you will always be loved.

In the midst of grief, loss, trauma, hunger, homelessness, an oppressive patriarchy that screamed there is no way out. Ruth loved. Ruth proclaimed love will find a way. Ruth refused to give up. Ruth promised to love no matter what. Ruth went all in with love. Ruth screamed "no" to oppression. Ruth shouted "yes" to the transforming majesty of love.

Ruth becomes a widowed immigrant in Bethlehem. Boaz is a generous loving farmer leaving behind a portion of the harvest for the poor. Boaz commanded his employees to never mistreat anyone seeking food. Boaz instructed his employees to leave some grain and give full access to water for all who thirst and provide shelter to the homeless in the granary. At mealtime, Boaz lovingly gave Ruth all the food and wine she could eat and enjoyed meals with Ruth, his employees and others who were hungry. Ruth kept going back to Boaz's farm. Boaz was inspired by Ruth's unwavering love. Boaz and Ruth married and cared for Naomi. Ruth and Boaz had children, including a multi great grandson, Jesus. The love of Ruth and Boaz expanded transforming love. Through the generations the love of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz is passed down to Jesus, passed down to us. God is creating a loving worldwide community. We are called to create a loving worldwide community. God loves everyone. We are commanded to love everyone.

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 100:5 "For the Lord is good. God's steadfast love continues forever and God's faithfulness continues to each generation."** **Psalm 71:20-21 "God, You have allowed me to suffer much hardship, but You will restore me to life again and lift me up from the depths of the earth. You will restore me to even greater honor and comfort me once again."** **Psalm 100:5 "For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever."**

Ruth clung to her last shred of hope and was courageous in love. And Ruth's love more than made a loving future for Naomi, Boaz and her family, Ruth's love made a future for Jesus, which is making a loving future for everyone. A nameless widow lovingly gave an offering of pennies which God multiplied through a distorted religious system to redeem people creating a more loving world.

Our scriptures proclaim no matter the tragedy, grief, exhaustion, despair, trauma, oppression, corruption of government, distortion of religion, brutality of sexism, resistance to immigration, horrors of poverty, love will find a way. No matter how bleak our existence, nor how deep our wounds love will deliver us to safety, to freedom, to a space where everyone can be their true selves. Love will transform all. Love will resurrect everyone. Love will bring heaven to earth. Love endures forever. Amen