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While we were in Maine at the end of August, we stayed at my parent's cottage and their friend Cina was visiting them also. My mother and Cina were roommates in nursing school in Boston 50 years ago and have remained very close friends ever since. Cina is blessed to live in a couple of beautiful places. She splits her time between her home on the island of Maui and her newer home on an island in New Zealand. Cina likes growing things so on Maui she grows King Proteas, very large flowers that are often used for displays in hotel lobbies. On New Zealand, her largest crop is lavender. She had a couple of little books of photographs that she showed us of her various plants and flowers and crops that she had in each place. One thing is for sure, you don't grow the exact same kinds of things on the side of a volcano in Maui that you grow in New Zealand. There is an old saying, "the climate controls the crops." There is a reason why there are a lot of blueberries in Maine and orange groves in Florida. The difference in climate and soil conditions leads to different crops. The same thing is true in churches.

The First Letter of John makes it abundantly clear that one of the climate characteristics most essential to a Christian church and a Christian life is love.

1 John 3:11-18

11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, **that we should love one another**. 12 We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life because **we love one another**.

Whoever does not love abides in death. 15 All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 16 We know **love** by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God's **love** abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Author Victor Hugo **wrote the supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved**. "We love something or someone when we promote its good for its own sake. Love's contrary is malice, and its simple absence is indifference. Love is not the same thing as desire, for I may desire something without even wishing it well, much

less willing its good. I might desire a chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream cone. But I do not wish it well; I wish to eat it. This is the difference between desire and love.

1 John says what characterizes the deepest essence of God is love – that is, will to good. It is not hard for God to love, but it is impossible, given his nature, for him not to love.”¹

In 1 John 4:19, we’re told, *“We love because he first loved us.”*

As we have heard repeatedly on our journey through all 66 books of the Old and New Testaments - the supreme message of the Bible is that God loves us and in a church we have the opportunity to share love with others and to receive love in return. When we know and believe that God loves us in an incredibly sacrificial way, this enables us to love others sacrificially. Loving other people the way God loves us is not easy. We don’t always make it easy for God or other people to love us – we all have our moments when we can be difficult. God’s love is amazing, steady and unchanging, and God’s love sets us free from sin and shame and brokenness.

1 John 3:16 says, *“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”*

Fourteen times in the New Testament we are told to **“love one another.”**

Love is not a second hand emotion like Tina Turner sang in a song, it is a laying down of our lives for one another. For most of us, this is not a one time, truly giving of our life like Jesus on the cross, or people like firefighters or soldiers.

Loving one another by laying down our lives is shown in less dramatic, more mundane, everyday little things, in how we treat people. Loving one another is shown in being kind, forgiving, listening, being charitable, not insisting on our own way, praying, serving, caring, bearing burdens, protecting, and strengthening. There are many ways to demonstrate love in church including the most basic how we interact and treat and speak to one another including going out of our way to greet and talk with newcomers or guests to help them feel welcome.

Loving one another in the same way Jesus loves us is a sign of authentic Christian discipleship. We don’t want the *Good News* of God’s love for us in Jesus, which the scriptures tell us to share, to become the *Good Rules* we are trying to enforce. What Jonathan Swift wrote many years ago is still sadly true today, **“We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”**

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2002, 130-131

We all need God's help to love. In his book *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland writes: "My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I **need God to help me give**, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be **kind**, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me **love**, as I seem beyond being able to love."²

We all need God to help us love because without God's love in our hearts we will prove ourselves utterly incapable of loving others as Jesus does. And the cost of failing to express love, whether verbally or non-verbally, can be devastating. Perhaps that's why a poet wrote:

"If ever you are ever going to love me,
Love me now, while I can know
The sweet and tender feelings
Which from true affection flow.

Love me now while I am living.
Do not wait until I am gone
And then have it chiseled in marble,
Sweet words on ice-cold stone.

If you have tender thoughts of me,
Please tell me now.
If you wait until I am sleeping, never to awaken,
There will be death between us,
And I won't hear you then.

So if you love me, even a little bit,
Let me know it while I am living
So I can treasure it.³

There are many practical ways to express love and as author Gary Chapman says, we each have love languages that mean more to us than others. He suggests that **Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Acts of Service, Gifts, and Physical Touch are five love languages** we can use to express love to others. Which of those means the

² Bausch, 312.

³ William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*, Twenty-Third Pub. Mystic, CT, 1999, 363-364.

most to you? Do you know which of those is most important to those closest to you? It is worth finding out. As we seek to love others, 1 John 4:12 says, *“If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.”*

A mother and daughter were having lunch after some shopping. Sitting near them was an older woman who ate silently and appeared to be extremely unhappy. As they got up to leave, the mother walked over to the woman and said, *“Excuse me, but you remind me so much of my mother. Would you mind if I give you a hug?”*

The older woman beamed and gratefully accepted the hug. It obviously made her feel much better.

“That was really sweet, Mom,” the daughter said when they got outside, *“but I didn’t think she looked at all like Grandma.”* *“Nor did I,”* said the mother cheerfully.

Even if there is a person we wish we could have expressed love to who is now gone, there are many more people who desperate for a touch of love.

Love never ends. Love is the gift that lives on because the power of love is so transforming. School of course begins this week or did last week and one of my favorite stories about a student and teacher is a reminder how one never knows the whole story behind each student or each teacher. Teddy Stallard certainly qualified as “one of the least”: disinterested in school; musty, wrinkled clothes; hair never combed; one of those kids with an expressionless, glassy, unfocused stare. When Miss Thompson spoke to Teddy in her 5th grade class, he always gave one-syllable answers. Unattractive, unmotivated, and distant, he was just plain hard to like.

Even though his teacher said she loved everyone in her class the same, down inside she wasn’t being completely truthful. Whenever she marked Teddy’s papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting Xs next to the wrong answers, and when she put the Fs at the top of the papers, she always did it with flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy’s records and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

First grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

Second grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth grade: Teddy is very slow, but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came, and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy."

When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And children, taking their cues from their teacher, readily agreed with "Oohs" and "Aahs."

At the end of the day when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said, "*Miss Thompson...Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother...and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents.*" When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, a new teacher welcomed them. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time after he finished fifth grade. Then one day she received a note that read:

"Dear Miss Thompson, I wanted you to be the first to know: I will be graduating second in my class. Love Teddy Stallard."

Four years later, another note came:

"Dear Miss Thompson, They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard."

And four years later... “Dear Miss Thompson, As of today I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I wanted you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now: Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard.”

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy’s mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had loved Teddy in way he could never forget.”⁴

The love of Jesus Christ is what can truly transform the human heart. This is the love that God pours into our hearts and we in turn love God and Jesus, and others as well.

“The love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life at a time.”⁵

When we let God love us, we will have love to share with others.

⁴ Bausch, 95-97.

⁵ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, Zondervan, 2002, 21.