



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

LOVE: A CLOSER LOOK

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How many kiwi fans do we have here this morning (and I don't mean the birds)? Apparently the world of kiwi fruit is about to be radically transformed. Scientists in New Zealand have announced that they have cracked the genetic code for kiwis. They claim they now can introduce new exciting colors and flavors, so they can make your favorite fruit look and taste like something else. Maybe it will be like those Harry Potter Jelly Beans, where you think you're biting into something sweet, but then it tastes like soap or earthworms.

Actually it's not quite that exotic. Mostly they have perfected the ability to get the best NATURAL flavor and color from kiwis. They are unlocking the potential in the fruit itself. After 8 years of intense study, researchers are hoping their results will enable farmers to grow healthier, more productive crops that ripen sooner, stay on shelves longer and have better taste. Interestingly enough, they are also looking at how to turn kiwis into biofuel. So I guess if you don't like the new flavors, you can just stick them in your gas tank.

It's all about productivity – making the most of the fruit. That is this series in a nutshell. Last week we began to look at the fruit of the Spirit. We said that it's not a big to do list for us, but rather a gift for God. What we want to know is how to make the most of it. How can we see more fruit, with blazing color and exciting flavor that radically transforms us? How can the fruit become fuel in our lives? What we're looking for is fusion – a way to blend faith and life together.

Last week I read a portion of Galatians from the Message translation. This morning, I'd like to revisit a portion of that same text, but using the New International Version instead.

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Would it be disrespectful to compare Paul to Mr. Bean? Our family has been watching some old Mr. Bean episodes, and there's this great one where he is packing the world's smallest suitcase. You see all his stuff laid out on the bed, and you think, "There's no

way he's going to stuff all that into that one little bag." But sure enough, after some creative adjustments on his part, that's what he does.

Paul has jam packed these two little verses with way more meaning than should ever fit in such a small space. I normally like to preach the big picture. Give me a chapter length story and let me pull out the highlights. I like finding the major themes in a passage. I like context. Going word by word isn't really my style.

But when Paul packs so many important words in such a small space, it seems much more fitting to slow down and take them back out of the suitcase one by one to see what we've got. So over the next few Sundays, we're going to look at each word in this list one by one, starting with love.

Love. Wow. I guess we might as well start with the most challenging concept first, huh? How in the world do we tackle that subject? It's huge. If there's one word that is overused and misunderstood in English, it would have to be love. It's just not very precise. I can talk about how much I love my wife and then in the next sentence use the exact same word to say how much I love Chicago style, deep dish pepperoni pizza. I've made the correct word choice both times, even though in my mind I mean two completely different things. Hopefully.

Here's my fear this morning: That I am going to start talking and you are instantly going to tune me out because you are going to assume I can't possibly say anything new that you don't already know about love. And you're probably right. It's all been said and I'm not clever enough to come up with something new. But some of the best sermons I have ever preached have been ones where people have heard something that I didn't even say. It's the amazing thing about God's word. The Holy Spirit can take it and say what he wants. And when you hear it, it always sounds fresh. So I'd like to take just a moment before we begin and give you a chance to ask him to open your heart and ears to his thoughts on this very well-worn subject.

Paul starts his discussion about the fruit of the Spirit with love, and it's the supreme word in the bunch. I think there are two primary reasons why love should have top billing. To begin with, it is the word that best describes God.

1 John 4:8

The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love — so you can't know him if you don't love.

Let's say for a moment that I claim to be best friends with Michael Jordan. I can tell you that he was born February 17th. I can tell you he's originally from Brooklyn, that he has his own line of shoes and that he has had a bit of a gambling problem. But if I don't know about his basketball career or that he's probably the greatest basketball player who ever lived, if I've never been to his house for a game of horse, then I can't really say I know him very well.

If we claim to know God and have his Spirit and yet our lives don't reflect his love, we need to take a hard look at ourselves, because that's the character that most identifies him.

The second reason I think love deserves our highest attention is because it's not just a fruit of the Spirit – it's Christ's double commandment.

Matthew 22:37-40

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."

This is the paradox about love. Yes it is a gift. But it is also a task. We have a responsibility to share the fruit we've been given with the people around us who are hungry for it.

I could get totally overwhelmed by this prospect. Loving God wholeheartedly is a tough enough challenge. But loving my neighbor as myself? Think about how huge of a command that is. God may be able to love the whole world, but I'm not God. How do I love people the same way I love myself when there are so many people out there? I have limited resources and time. I will burn out if I pour out all my energy on every person and need.

Which is why I think the wording in Jesus' command is so brilliant. First, he calls us to love our neighbor – the person we're rubbing shoulders with at any given moment. The person who is in our space, crossing our path. It could be a friend or it could be an enemy, but there is some point of contact. While it may not be any easier to live out, it's much more manageable to think about love on that scale.

The second thing Jesus said was to love our neighbors as ourselves. Which of course suggests that we are remembering to love and care for ourselves. If we're trying to love in an unhealthy way, feeling overly responsible to care for everybody else at the expense of our own emotional health, then we're no longer loving ourselves and so we're no longer being obedient to what Jesus was asking us to do.

When we think this instruction of Christ's is too big, it's good to hear the words of Mother Theresa:

This is the commandment of the great God, and he cannot command the impossible. Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within the reach of every hand. Anyone may gather it and no limit is set.

If God is going to ask us to do something, he's also going to supply the ability and resources to do it. If he wants us to love, we can depend on him to help us do it. We don't have to generate it ourselves.

But if love is something Jesus could command us to do, that changes the way we define love a bit. I tend to think of love more in the feeling category than as a skill that can be developed. I think of it as something that is spontaneous and unplanned. But if we've got the Holy Spirit in our lives, then we have the capacity to grow our love for other people. It has the ability to be worked and developed.

Do you remember the little book that came out a few years ago that made the prayer of Jabez so popular? Jabez was the man who prayed that God would bless him and increase his territory. And God honored that prayer. The book encouraged people to pray that prayer for themselves.

This morning, I want to challenge you to pray that God would increase your capacity to love to expand your skill set in loving, that he would bless you with a larger heart for people. I don't want to give you just another definition of love this morning, some nice, sentimental drivel that you can tuck away with your inspirational posters. I want to be the vinegar in your soda and start a reaction. I want to toss the ball to you and say, "Run with it." Love is an instruction to follow, a responsibility to act.

Given that, I think one of the most helpful ways to come at the topic this morning will be by looking at love in action. So I'd like to take us back to the Old Testament to re-examine one of the most famous friendships of all time: Jonathan and David.

Jonathan first met David right after he had killed Goliath. His father, King Saul, had called David in to congratulate him on his victory.

1 Samuel 18:1-4

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. (Sounds just like what Jesus commanded, doesn't it?) From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

In this brief introduction to this new friendship, we begin to catch some glimpses of what it means to love somebody else like you love yourself. How do we love with God-like love? One of the first things we can pick up is that

Love sees others through spiritual eyes.

We're told that Jonathan "became one in spirit with David". There was this instant deep connection on a soul level. It had nothing to do with David's great accomplishments or the fact that Jonathan was a powerful crown prince. It was far more personal and about who they were on the inside.

That's what I mean by spiritual eyes – eyes that look past the surface of someone's appearance or words or actions, eyes that recognize the inner being as a person of worth.

That might sound obvious, but we don't look at most people that way. Instead we judge how useful they are to us. If we need them, we treat them well and if we don't, we ignore them. And if they stand in our way, we get angry with them. Dr. Philip Kennson says, "We tend to view other people in the marketplace not as unique and splendid people in their own right who warrant our attention, but as actors in our drama."

Oooh. Ouch. We all do tend to think of the world in terms of ourselves. What we're aiming for though is to get out of that, to see people not as bit players in our lives, but as spiritual beings. What that means, to borrow from Dr. Kenneson, is that

Each person is unique and splendid. I am not saying we need to be best friends and try to have that instant chemistry with everyone. But we can learn to see everyone through spiritual eyes. We can look at others as unique and splendid people who warrant our attention.

Loving someone is a spiritual act, because ***each person is more than just a body.*** They are a spirit in a body, a spirit created and loved by God. And God has as many hopes and plans for that other person as he does for me. We talk about the evils of men treating women as objects, and this is why it's so hateful. It's dehumanizing to not recognize that somebody has a spirit.

But it's not just how men view women. It's how we treat anybody around us who isn't necessary for our own agenda. When we ignore or dismiss people as unimportant, we are missing out on who they really are inside.

I think C.S. Lewis said it really well:

It is a serious thing...to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.

If we could only see each other the way we'll be in heaven, we'd look so fantastic we'd almost want to treat each other like gods. Seeing through spiritual eyes means recognizing that ***each person has an eternal future.*** A glorious, brilliant eternity with a God who thinks they're precious. If we could keep that in mind when we bump into people in the grocery store or on the street, it would revolutionize how we interact here in this life.

In addition to seeing people through spiritual eyes,

Love makes a choice with a long memory.

I Samuel says,

And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

Call it a contract, call it a promise – a covenant is a choice to commit yourself to something or someone and then not letting yourself forget that you made that decision.

Thomas Trask was a pastor in the Midwest for 25 years. One time a couple came to him for premarital counseling. This couple wanted to write their own vows for their wedding. So they took some traditional vows and did some rewriting. Then they came back to him and read what they came up with.

It all sounded pretty good until they got to the end when it said: “For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until we no longer love each other.”

The pastor said, “Whoa. Hold it. What do you mean, ‘until we no longer love each other?’”

They said, “Well, we know couples sometimes fall out of love, and we don’t think anybody should have to live their lives out unhappily.”

I’m guessing they’re divorced by now. Every marriage goes through phases where the feelings of love change, but a vow is a commitment that doesn’t depend on that. Real love is far more serious. It makes choices and sticks with them. Several times in the Bible, Jonathan and David made binding covenants to show how seriously they were about showing love to each other. Further on in I Samuel it says

1 Samuel 20:16-17

So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the LORD call David's enemies to account." And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.

Years later, after Jonathan had died, David sought out Jonathan’s last remaining heir, who was no crippled and poor. David took him in and took care of him because he was still committed to Jonathan.

We’ve gotten the idea that love is about feelings when it is more about making and keeping commitments.

Stephen Covey, the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was doing a seminar one time. A man came up to him on the break and said, “I really like what you’re saying, but you know, each situation is so different. Take my marriage for example. I’m really worried. My wife and I just don’t have the same feelings for each other we used to. I guess I don’t love her and she doesn’t love me. What should I do?”

Stephen Covey asked, “The feelings just aren’t there anymore?”

The man said, “That’s right. And we’ve got three children we’re really concerned about. What do you suggest?”

Stephen replied, “Love her.”

“No – I told you. The feeling just isn’t there anymore.”

“Love her.”

“You don’t understand. That feeling just isn’t there.”

“Then love her. If the feeling isn’t there, that’s a good reason to love her.”

“But how do you love when you don’t love?”

And Stephen said, “My friend, love is a verb. Love – the feeling – is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?”

Are we willing to do that? To make a choice to love, and then stick with that choice when we no longer feel loving toward the other person?

When Christ sat down with his disciples for their last supper together, he took the cup of wine and told them, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” His love is a contract commitment that he entered into voluntarily. When he wept in the garden, he still remembered his promise and kept loving. When he was being beaten and ridiculed, he remembered his promise and kept loving. When he hung their suffering on the cross and was tempted to call for angels to take him down, he remembered his promise and kept loving.

We think love should come naturally and feel good, when in fact it is a series of intentional decisions to pick up our cross, to love our enemies, to die to ourselves. It is the choice to speak tenderly to your child who is up at midnight for the third night in a row. It is the choice to respect your boss’s correction without reacting defensively. It is making a million decisions that are all the same: I will love you no matter what.

It’s easy to make promises. It’s much more difficult to take the initiative to act on them. Jonathan didn’t just say, “I love this guy.” He took a very concrete step to show it.

Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

This is more than just giving David some hand-me-downs. This is a highly symbolic gesture. At this point, David has already been anointed by Samuel to be the next king. The Lord chose him and rejected Saul. We aren’t told whether or not that was public knowledge yet. But given the fact that the decision had been made, the person with the most to lose was Jonathan. He was next in line to be king. Through no fault of his own, his place had been given to another.

So when he willingly hands over his robe and his weapons, Jonathan is making a statement. He is saying that he is okay with David being his king. He isn't resentful. He doesn't fight it. Instead, he throws in his lot behind David and chooses to be his friend instead of his enemy. He gladly gives up his spot.

Love puts relationships ahead of rights.

Often, to love somebody means giving up something that would be our right to have. We deserve time to ourselves. We deserve to be heard. We deserve to be treated with respect. We deserve to hear an apology. Those are all things we could claim as rights. But do we fight for those rights, or do we fight for the relationship?

Sometimes it's an imaginary right we think we have. Maybe we think somebody else's success rightfully should have been ours. We resent their happiness and achievements, because when we compare ourselves to them, it feels like we got cheated. But love has a generous spirit that celebrates the victories other people have. It cares about the people above and beyond getting what it deserves.

The other kind of "rights" are the "I'm rights" that we insist on so often. We want to be right. We want to win the argument. We want people to get what it is we're trying to say and agree with us. And when they don't, we lose our loving edge.

It was Francis of Assisi who prayed, "O, Divine Master, grant that I might not so much seek...to be understood as to understand." Would we rather be understood or have love? Would we rather insist that people acknowledge we were in the right, or are we willing to sacrifice that pleasure for the greater pleasure of building a connection with the other person? Earlier in the letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote,

Galatians 2:20

Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me.

So the question becomes this: where is your ego still central? Who is it important that you appear righteous in front of? Love puts pride aside for the sake of the other person.

Jonathan had every right to insist on his inheritance. But he didn't. He even went so far as to help protect his friend from his father – who knew what David meant for Jonathan's future and DIDN'T want to give it up. King Saul chased David all over the countryside, trying to kill him. But Jonathan intervened.

1 Samuel 23:15-18

While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you.

You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the LORD.

Once again, they come back to a covenant. My favorite line in that passage though is the one that says Jonathan went to David to help him find strength in God. Now that's love, because

Love returns to its source.

I was talking to a friend once who described his mother as somebody who always had to insert herself in a crisis. And I thought, wow, that's me. I'm always poking my nose into other people's business, barging in to try and save the day.

Playing Messiah isn't really love. Real love knows where it came from and that there's only one source. I think it is terrific that this verse doesn't say Jonathan tried to strengthen David – it says he helped him find his strength in God. He pointed David toward real help. Love is always looking Godward.

Someday I hope to have a water feature in our backyard, because I love the sound of a fountain. The only problem is that I would want to do something all out of proportion to our yard, some monster size cascading waterfall that takes thousands of gallons, when probably all I could afford would be one of the little trickly ones that use about a teaspoon of water.

Fountains are beautiful. But fountains depend on one important thing: The water has to keep returning to the pump. Behind the scenes, a powerful motor is what gives the water its ability to keep cycling through and making the beautiful sights and sounds.

So how did Jonathan do that for David? How did he help him find his strength in God? We naturally look at what he said to David. He encouraged him with his words, reminding him of God's promise and calling that were sure. Those were words of life. Having someone speak truth and comfort when you are in a dark place is a huge act of love.

But perhaps even more profound than what he said was what Jonathan did. The text says he went to be with David in his suffering. He left his own safe, comfortable perch back at the palace, risking his life, risking any relationship with his father, putting himself in harm's way to be with his friend. That was a supreme act of love. Love that comes alongside someone in pain is love that points to God.

How does that point to God? Simply through this: Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means "God WITH us." His coming to earth was God's ultimate demonstration of his love, placing himself alongside us in our suffering, joining us in it. When we on a small scale follow the same pattern, we are showing real love, because it has that same character to it as our source.

On Monday of this past week, Thomas Vander Woude was working out in his yard with his 20 year old son Joseph. Joseph has Down syndrome, and as they were working, he slipped and fell through a metal covering into the septic tank behind the house.

Thomas immediately jumped into the tank to save him, because not only was it a deep hole – it was filled with sewage. Thomas submerged himself down in the muck so he could push Joseph up from below and keep his head up where he could breathe. It worked. Joseph made it out alive. But his father died to make it possible.

That is a terribly sad and terribly beautiful story. Such a strong, sacrificial love is so powerful to watch in action. I think the reason it touches us so deeply is in part because it is such a clear picture of where our love comes from.

Do you know how much God loves you? Until it sinks into your own heart and brain, you won't be able to share it with others. He stepped down into the sewage of this world to lift us up out of it. That's the kind of Father we have. This is the God who comes out to your wilderness to be with you. This is the God who gave up his rights for the sake of relationship, because he made a choice to be committed to you.

We can turn each one of these points into a personal question:

Am I seeing people spiritually?

Am I making the choice to love them and sticking to that choice?

Am I fighting for the relationship or my rights?

But the biggest question is am I returning to my source?

1 John 4:19

We love because he first loved us.

We are the beloved ones.

It's when we take in the depth of God's love more fully that we're able to share it more freely. The more we consider God's care and compassion for us, the more our love will look like his.

I love the story of how Karl Barth, the great German theologian, once came to America on a speaking tour. He was a brilliant thinker who wrote many works that have had a major impact on the church. At a lecture in Chicago, a student stood up and asked him, "Dr. Barth, what's the most profound truth you've discovered?"

Without hesitation, Karl Barth said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

I pray that you will know that profound truth down deep in your soul as you seek to love God back and love your neighbor as yourself.