

An Abiding Relationship of Love 2024
 John 15:8-12, 17 1 John 4:19-5:5, 12-13

John 15:8-12, 17 (New Revised Standard Version)

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

1 John 4:19-5:5, 12-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Have you ever watched a little toddler taking their first steps,
 usually into the encouraging arms of one who loves them dearly?
 It is a most delightful and joyful moment in life.

It is a wonderful accomplishment that we are happy to celebrate,
 but actually, it marks just the beginning of a much longer journey,
 for it's not the end, but only the start of lifetime of walking,
 leaping, ambling, wandering, jumping, hiking & traipsing...

Yes, certainly learning to take those first few steps is significant,
 but only because it allows them to explore, stroll and run further,
 and continue to grow and expand that learned skill and ability...
... for how tragic if they stopped with just those first few steps.

Today in worship we are celebrating the hard work of our graduates.
 It is a wonderful accomplishment that we are happy to celebrate,
 but it only marks the beginning of a much, much longer journey,
 as they'll go out into the world to apply what they've learned.

It is nowhere near the end, but the start of a lifetime vocation,
 of using and developing their God-given abilities even further,
 as God's gracious love & blessings will be put into action.

The truth is, every one of us is capable of something magnificent,

doing something that matters, that is wonderfully fulfilling,
and that uses the best and finest of our gifts to glorify God,
as an expression of our shared faith and commitments.

Every person who has ever been created by God has been uniquely
and purposefully blessed and gifted with abilities to bless others
so we can please and serve the Lord for all the days of our lives...

...which happens best when we blend our abilities & skills with others,
combining to bring out the best of each to produce something
that's much greater than the sum of all the individual parts.

I was hanging out with some friends one time,
some of whom were musicians who played in a band together.

One of the guys started whistling the theme song from a TV show,
and another started trying to work out the tune on his guitar,
then the bass and keyboard kicked in with their variations.
Without any written music score, they just kept at it,
until together by trial and error found the right notes,
and all were clearly having a great time working it out together.

Gradually, listening to each other, and playing together,
it was fascinating to follow as each one contributed their part,
no one dominating, but each one adding their own special bit...

... and as a non-musician it was remarkable
to watch and listen the music of each complimenting the others...

**... much like the way our faith grows, develops and deepens
as we gradually work out our faith together in community,**
with each of us working out our individual gifts together,
as a community trying to live out the love we've received,
fitted to complement each other and our various gifts.

All of us are each entrusted with blessings for the whole body.
God bestows wonderful gifts for the benefit of the whole church,
given to us as grace and blessing beyond our salvation,
**to equip us to do something extraordinary - to do ministry,
so that together we can accomplish God's mission & purpose.**

The ideal, as it's described in Scripture is that each one of us
lives out the full blessing and abundant satisfaction
of freely serving joyfully with our particular gifts.

It is like individual jigsaw puzzle pieces that are fit together
and combine to show a picture of God's love, grace and purpose,
**much like each uniquely skilled musician combining
each contributing to produce their musical harmony,**
as a shared expression of gratitude to God who first loved us.

Listen to how John explains this in his letter, vs. 19, 21-5:2

We love because he first loved us. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.

The central message of the life and teaching of Jesus is that
 first God loves us, even before we know or care about God,
 reaching down to us while we were yet sinners in rebellion...
 ... as this was exemplified by Jesus welcoming, eating with and
 associating with sinners, tax-collectors & other outcasts.

Jesus came to show them they were loved and precious to God,
 and that they were welcome and accepted by God,
and not condemned to continue in their defective ways.

The message from Jesus is whatever our sin, failure or disaster,
 God's gracious love is always way bigger and far greater,
 so the focus is God's love, and not the judgement we deserve.

The love that John was writing about is God's grace and mercy,
 favor that is totally unearned, underserved and sacrificial,
 that focuses on the need and best-interest of the recipient...
 ... much like mothers I've seen in a hospital caring for their newborn.

The Truth, God is continuously working toward our good & healing.
 And, when we recognize that and we really do trust the Lord,
 the truth of that love will redefine everything about who we are,
 along with our values, goals, attitude and purpose in life,

and that relationship of grace will redirect how we live,
 which means that the pieces of our life finally fit together...
...within the call, purpose & loving embrace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the night in the garden shortly before he was arrested,
 Jesus knew the terrible events that were coming,
 so he tried to prepare and encourage his disciples,
for it's in response to God's grace that we respond with love, vs. 9, 12

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; **abide in my love.** This is my commandment,
 that you love one another as I have loved you.

Literally, abide with me means to set your tent up next to mine,
 to live close to me and share my campsite, be in relationship,
 so that I can be present to share and influence your life,
and abiding together is the way that God heals and changes our lives.
Abide is to allow grace to increasingly guide & influence my life.

One of the windows through which that nature and character of God
 is revealed is through **the experience & ideal of maternal love.**

Throughout God's creation and certainly for most people,
 motherhood, maternal love, is one of the most basic & fundamental,

and one the most compelling forces in all of nature.

Now that's not to detract from, "Our Father who art in heaven",
but the Bible uses several **specifically maternal images**
to describe & help us understand the depth of God's compassion,
for God's love is far above & beyond any definition by gender.

And since today is **Mother's Day**, isn't this an appropriate time
for that focus, and to consider some of the **specifically maternal**
examples, images and metaphors that we find in God's Word...

... for the Bible is rich with a wide variety word pictures
that **use finite imagery to help explain the infinite**,
and to describe God's love and care for all humankind.

For instance, **the prophet Hosea (vs. 13:8)**
describes and compares the power and intensity of God's love,
as similar to **a mother bear fiercely guarding her cubs,**
to help illustrate the ferocious love our God has for us.

Through the prophet Isaiah (49:15),
we're given another image & promise of God's abiding love for us,
Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, **yet I will not forget you.**

Just as it's unlikely that a nursing mother could forget her baby,
or have no concern or compassion for her little child in need,
- so too God would never forget or abandon us.

Continuing to speak through the prophet in the next verse, vs. 16
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.
In Hebrew, the word "inscribed" is way more than just written,
but is literally to carve or cut into the palm of someone's hands.

If you have ever had
a cactus-spike, a sliver or a cut across the palm of your hand,
then you remember how painful it was every time you moved it,
and a constant reminder of where that wound was.

The Lord's love is described as having carved or inscribed us
into the palm of God's own hand, which keeps us constantly in mind.

When Jesus was crucified, that image was literally fulfilled,
as the sign of God's love was inscribed into his hands
when the cruel nails were driven in, piercing his flesh,
- and yes, God really loves us each one that much.

The life Jesus intends for us **is a relationship through** grace and faith,
a living faith derived from God's Spirit and presence within us.

When Jesus chooses and calls us, it's because of his gracious love
and not for the gifts and skills that we can offer or tasks we do.

It's all about love, what Jesus **has, and is and will** accomplish,
including **healing our wounds and brokenness, if we will allow it.**

And if we can get past our sense of our own accomplishment and pride
and if we can simply abide, trust and faithfully serve **from love,**
we can enjoy the rich pleasure of authentic friendship, vs. 9,
As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

Jesus loves us by accepting us and loving us even as we are.
Jesus came to create space for life lived in response to God's love,
to receive the blessing of a "**divinely-given do-over**"
no matter how badly or far we've strayed, failed or messed-up.

That is the Good News we're called to live and proclaim to the world,
to reach out **to all people** with the love of God in our hearts,
which means putting their interest and good ahead of ours.

It is dropping our defenses, our pretensions, our attitudes,
and resolving to love others, the way that Jesus loves us, vs. 4
... for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that
conquers the world, our faith.

**Surely it is a great compliment
and honor to mothers and to motherhood** that one of the ways
God chose to reveal and illustrate his own gracious love
was through the example of an ideal mother's love and nurture,
and for a mother's love, to serve as a **snapshot of God's grace.**

And today we give God thanks, and honor all the people in our lives
who have demonstrated maternal love and sacrifice to us,
reflecting the nature & power of God's gracious love for us.

Can a mother's love, nurture and comfort ever fail?
Can a mother ever forget, ignore or fail to fulfill motherhood?

Sadly yes. Tragically, yes sometimes it happens.

But the good news is that God's love will never fail...

... as we're promised in Romans 8:39, No matter what the world throws at us, nothing will ever separate
us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For thanks be to God, who will surely find some way to love us,
some pathway of compassion to nurture, protect and sustain us,
and absolutely and abundantly provides for all our needs.

I earnestly hope that this will be a happy Mother's Day for you,
and, if the commercialized sentimentality of the day
seems to trivialize disappointments or wounds you feel,

that you will find fresh comfort and renewed hope in the truth
**that Jesus Christ knows and cares about us and our hurts,
because our God is wise, compassionate & always loving.**

As John wrote, (Jn 10:10, 1Jn 4:9, Jn 15:9,12)

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly... God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.