

February 25, 2024
1 Corinthians 13:4-13
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

The Promise of Love is Personal

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is the season leading up to the holy days of Jesus' death and resurrection in which we examine our lives. We reflect on how we act, what we say, even how we think. We ask ourselves if we have loved God with our heart and mind and strength. Have we truly loved our neighbors as ourselves? Have we ordered our lives after Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us?

Put simply, love is God's law. Love is also God's promise. God created the world in love and formed human beings and set them in the world FOR love. But things didn't go as God hoped they would. As human beings, our first instinct was not to love one another. It was to be afraid of one another. It was to control and to divide and conquer. To put ourselves first and look out for ourselves first. And it wasn't long until creation started to fall apart. Last week, we talked about how God flooded the world to destroy everything and start again. God saved Noah and some animals in an ark. But the terrible destruction was too much to

be called love. So God promised to never destroy things in anger again.

For there to be love, we need to feel safe.

Love needs more than a promise. It needs more than vague and general assurances. It needs to be specific. It needs to be personal and tangible.

Love is at its best when it is with a particular person at a particular time and a particular place. And the more particular it is, the more powerful it is. So God chooses a couple, Abraham and Sarah. And with them, God creates a personal relationship with them. God promises them a family; and with this specific promise, God will bless all the families of the earth.

It is easy to talk about love in a general sense. It's easy to say we will love others. But when love is required in a specific place and time, it's hard to DO it. You can say in the abstract that you love children; until you work at an afterschool program with 25 little terrors. You can say that you love your spouse, until you have to work together on budgeting and laundry and dirty dishes. You can say that you love your neighbor until you meet your neighbor, and they are rude or smelly or poor.

Unspecific, generalized love is easy, but particular love, persona love is hard.

Abraham and Sarah are particular people. They are a particular couple from Ur in Mesopotamia in the 18th century BCE. And when they are living these particular lives, God calls them to leave and go to a new and particular promised land. Where they will have a particular promised family. Now this particular couple is not young. Abraham and Sarah are not especially clever or spiritual or gifted. But God chooses them in particular. And through the years of their lives and their long journey, God learns to work with them and they learn to work with God. They learn to trust God. Along the way, of course, Abraham and Sarah make mistakes. They must deal with the limitations of Iron Age culture and its slavery and patriarchy. They must deal with the difficulties of infertility and immigration. Their story is unique. It is THEIR story. And yet, it is relatable enough to be our story too. The specific promises of a place to call home and connection to generations beyond is a longing we share too.

God's love for Abraham and Sarah is not generic or abstract. It is up close and it is personal. It exists in its own time and space. It speaks to their needs. And that's true for us as well. Each of us needs to feel love differently. We each have a love 'language' according to Gary Chapman. In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, he says there are five different ways people need love. Some people prefer words of affirmation; they need someone to say to them, "you did a great job. You are so smart, so helpful, so kind." Some people need quality time; they need others to be with them, to listen to them and be there for them. Some people need physical touch; a hug, a hand to hold. Others need acts of service; they feel loved with someone lends a helping hand with chores or plans a night out. And still others feel most loved by gifts, a note, a bunch of flowers, chocolate, something selected and given with thoughtful intention. Of those five languages, each of us prefers one. And what I prefer won't be what you prefer. I might want quality time when you want a present. You might want help with the daily chores when your spouse might really need hug. We are all different. So we have to

communicate. We have to ask each other and figure out the particulars of one another, so we can love and be loved.

Loving someone in particular takes time and effort. It is not something you can do overnight or on the fly. It has nothing to do with efficiency or cost-effectiveness. That means it's not easy. And we tend like things to be easy. We confess that's how we want to follow Jesus. We want quick fixes for things. We want relationships that will keep others at a distance and don't get too personal. But to know the love of God in Jesus, it needs to be personal. To love one another as Jesus loved us, it needs to be particular.

Dr. Bryan Shaw is a professor of chemistry at Baylor University. And he has developed a laboratory for blind students that enables them to do science. He uses 3-D models and touchable data sheets, and talking measuring equipment and robotic arms so students with blindness or low vision can participate. So they can be part of experimenting and can work with hazardous materials. Dr. Shaw says "Children with blindness are typically put in a corner very early in science education, and they're excluded... [mostly] because of safety concerns. But with a little work,

[we can] make it all accessible.” Dr. Shaw’s motivation was his son, Noah, who as an infant had an aggressive eye cancer. Despite losing one eye to the tumors, Noah is thriving at age 14 and able to explore science.¹ And the world is blessed because of this father’s particular love for his particular child.

Abraham and Sarah wanted a child. They wanted a place to call home. God had promised to help them. When they try to do things without God, they go awry. They try to live under fake identities. They try to have children through servants and slave girls. But it doesn’t work and it causes a lot of pain. Abraham and Sarah must learn to wait for the particular way of God. For the right time and the right place. And they must trust God because otherwise, they are too old and too alone. And this blessing from God isn’t just for them, it’s for all the families of the earth.

This is what love is, says the apostle Paul. It is particular. It is specific. It works within a certain context. And what works for one person will not

¹ <https://news.web.baylor.edu/news/story/2022/baylor-chemist-leads-13-million-research-project-make-chemistry-labs-and-concepts>

work for everyone. “We know things only in part,” Paul says. “We see things in a mirror dimly, as reflections and shadows. But we will know fully even as we have been fully known. The love of God is unfolding all around us. In this particular time and place. God loves us here and now. Love is the gift given to us right when we need it most.”

On March 11, 2011, the Fukushima nuclear power plant had a meltdown. It was caused by an earthquake and the following tsunami that shut down electricity. This shut down the systems at the nuclear power plant which then released radioactive material into the environment. More than 150,000 people were evacuated from the area. And everyone in the community was afraid of radiation poisoning. But the site had to be cleaned up. So a group of 200 Japanese retirees volunteered to go in. They called themselves the Skilled Veterans Corp, and they were made up of engineers and professionals who had expertise in nuclear power. They decided to go because any cancer caused by the radiation would take 20–30 years to develop. And their lives would be well over by then. This time and this place required them. And by this very particular act, they could take care of the people to come.

Love isn't a general thing. It isn't vague or abstract. It is personal and particular in our time and our space. It is embodied in our lives. With the families we have. And the neighbors we meet. And the community we live in. Love can't happen anywhere else. It can't occur any other time. Or in any other words or actions or gifts or touch or presence than yours. Love is realized in how we serve, how we sacrifice, how we offer space and grace. Love can only ever be personal. And when it is personal and particular, it blesses not just one, it blesses all.

God's love for us is personal. In the person of Jesus, we meet the one who knows us and our stories. Who understands us and cares for us and is gracious and merciful to us. Who wants to redeem us and resurrect us and give us new life. Who wants us to belong. Who wants us to be part of God's story and God's family. Who promises that this love isn't abstract or intangible. It's real and true and specifically for us. And may we take that love personally.