

## **LOVE PASSIONATELY GIVEN<sup>1</sup>**

Love is a very popular word in our society and people spend much of their lives in search of it. But as we know this often goes unfulfilled – is often misunderstood – is even more often misused. A recent search on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) reveals some interesting results: when you type in the word *money*, over 90,000 book titles are listed, *sex* reveals nearly 90,000 titles, *heaven* calls up over 27,000, *God* has over 170,000, and for *love* over 240,000 book titles are listed.

If you Google *love* you will get over 4.2 billion hits with some websites called, [ilovedogs.com](http://ilovedogs.com), [ilovecheese.com](http://ilovecheese.com) and [ilovelucy.com](http://ilovelucy.com). If you're looking for a partner there is [trueromancedatingservice.com](http://trueromancedatingservice.com), [lovetest.com](http://lovetest.com) and [matchmaker.com](http://matchmaker.com). There's even a website called, [thelovecalculator.com](http://thelovecalculator.com), which claims to give you the odds of your relationship lasting!

The common element in these sites is that love is seen as something arising exclusively out of human desire and belonging – solely within the realm of human gratification. It is created by humanity – for humanity. At least, this seems to be the way that many people see it.

The scriptures reveal to us a love that is more than simply an entanglement of feelings and emotion. They proclaim a love that is real, genuine and beyond superficial human fancies. We are invited to embrace this love. God's message for us is clear and profound in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.* God's love is evident in the very fact that God gave Jesus as the best expression of that love. At the very heart of who we are as Christians, this concept of love is what defines us and our relationship with the divine. God – motivated by love – gave to us passionately and extravagantly.

Love is the foundation for the fruit of the Spirit: joy is love that sings; peace is love that rests; patience – love that endures; kindness – love's touch; goodness – love's character; faithfulness – love's habit; self-control is love holding the reins. It is this love that has the power to transform – to change lives one by one.

David knew this love. Through Nathan, God said, *I will be his father, and he will be my son. My love will never be taken away from him. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever; your throne will be established forever.*

The prophet Isaiah spoke of this love, saying: *I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you, do not be afraid; for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.*

Jesus embodies this love as we are told in our scripture reading from this morning: *...In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

We can be truly thankful for such a passionate gift – beyond our highest expectations and perfectly suited for us – a flawless fit.

Love's power is in its distinctive expression – in the living person of Jesus – given with ultimate passion. It isn't connected with the whims of our emotions or gratifications. When our lives are characterized by awareness of this gift – with the profound gratitude this gift causes – then we become committed to living out that same passionate love in our world as God's agents of change.

In 1 John 4 we also read: *So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

If you to close your eyes and picture God, what do you see? How would you describe God? What is your image of God? In I John, there is this simple image that God is love, and those who abide in love – who live in love – abide in God and God abides or lives in them.

The word *abide* comes from a Greek word *menno* which means to sojourn – to continue – to be held. So when we read this text we hear two things: when we live in love – we are held in God; and when we love God – God is held in us.

Think about how God abides in us – how we are the holding place for God. We are God's abode – God's apartment – God's condo – God's dorm room – God's house or God's hangout.

Why does God choose to live in us – to be held by us? Just because! Not because we are beautiful or smart or rich or perfect or fabulous or because have worked hard or prayed hard – just because. We are God's tent – God's shelter – God's home.

We human beings don't really fully know who we are. Most of us have a case of mistaken identity. If we really believed that God lives in us, how would our lives look? How could we be cruel to anybody, blow up anybody, fight with anybody, destroy the souls of anybody if we thought they housed God? How could we put poison in our bodies, let someone hurt us, not take care of ourselves if we believed God was inside? How could we even bear to hurt the feelings of the other if we thought that God would get God's feelings hurt at the same time?

I say we don't believe it – not nearly enough, not for long enough – for it to shape whom we are and how we live. And so we wander about – lost and lonely – frightened and false – angry and agitated – listless and lifeless. Or we run around with such speed and haste so as to avoid ever noticing that we are empty inside or afraid.

We live life without balance. What would it mean for us to live as though we live in God? As though the divine resides within?

What an opportunity we have to be God's instruments of love! As the kingdom of heaven is birthed within us, God calls us as believers to cultivate values of peace, justice, and service in a world that is in want and need of healing. Our Christian path – to which we have been called by Jesus – is one of giving – our time, talents and resources – in showing and sharing the heart and message of God.

What an opportunity we have as Presbyterians to join in the work of Presbyterian World Service & Development which enables us to touch the lives of people around the world as they strive to build better futures! In its work, PWS&D joins faithful and passionate partners worldwide to address real needs through prayerful and financial support. We have been part of massive relief efforts to help survivors of the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in

Haiti, flooding in Pakistan and the enormous disaster in Japan. We are also engaged in sustained development by supporting human rights efforts, protecting the vulnerable, improving health and nutrition, ensuring children receive education and helping to improve the status of women both in the home and community. These are just some of the ways we are able to share the passionate love with which we have been graced – to live in God and allow God to blossom within us.

We don't always see the fruits of our labour – the blessing of our donations – but the change we are having in the lives of others through PWS&D is extraordinarily meaningful.

Narmada is just one example of a woman whose life has been forever changed. Living in an impoverished community in rural India, Narmada lost both her parents to illness, and her eldest brother was forced to drop out of school in order to provide for the family. Overcome with grief, Narmada sunk into a deep depression. Every day was a struggle to get by. She described living a dark life without hope. She wanted to die.

A recommendation from her pastor led Narmada to attend a PWS&D-supported community college that changed everything. She began attending classes and received the support she needed to complete her schooling. Through the friendships she made, and with guidance from the college's dedicated and compassionate teachers, Narmada took an interest in the nursing program. Her teachers watched as Narmada's attitude toward life began to change.

In addition to helping students complete grade 12 and learn vocational skills, a key part of the college's curriculum is teaching life skills. Students learn about interpersonal relations and how to improve their communication skills. Over the course of their studies, they develop a fresh sense of confidence, enthusiasm and are able to recognize their own potential.

Narmada, now a young woman in her early twenties, is enrolled in the nursing program. She has learned to cope and thrive. She has big plans to become a psychologist so she can help others who are struggling with similar difficulties find peace and hope.

Narmada has a new outlook on life and is incredibly grateful for the strangers from another country that supported her journey back to emotional health – into a life with promise. She is just one of the many people whose lives have been touched by our commitment to overcoming poverty and injustice – helping people lead lives filled with dignity and opportunity.

When we live from the love of God that is within us – live and love with passion and vibrancy for one another's sake – we extend authentic love by our giving. We share the divine that dwells in us as we shelter the homeless – strengthen the weak and marginalized – rescue the wounded – and empower the innocent.

*So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. And this love – living in and through us – has the power to transform – to change lives one by one. Thanks be to God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from material prepared by The Rev. Daniel Cho for Presbyterian World Service & Development worship resource 2012