

# Welcome

If you know three facts about my wife, one of them is likely that she is afraid of sharks. In fact, on our Honeymoon, we went snorkeling in the Pacific. The water was about 60 ft deep and that perfect crystal-clear blue so you could see right down to the bottom. I was having the time of my life, exploring the ocean. I didn't realize she was on the verge of a panic attack the whole time, sure that at any moment, a shark was going to dart in and devour us both.

We both love the ocean, but early in our marriage, she wouldn't go in past her calves (because she read that sharks can attack in calf-deep water).

If you know three facts about my wife, you probably also know that she's brave and tough. So she wasn't going to let her fear of sharks stop her. Every time we go to the ocean, she'd go in a little deeper. To her knees, then to her thighs. Her waist, her stomach, her chest.

Every time, she would shout, "Look how deep I'm going! Look how brave I am!" and we'd laugh together.

For the last several years since we've moved to Texas, we have gone to Austin each summer to participate in the Alamo Drafthouse's "JAWS on the Water", where you watch *JAWS* while you're floating in tubes in a lake. It's a lot easier to convince yourself lake sharks aren't a thing when it's light outside. But she loves it.

Speaking of *JAWS*, we decided a few years ago that one of our bucket list items would be going cage diving with great white sharks - the most dangerous predators in the ocean. And she'll tell everyone who asks that she's convinced she'll die of fright in that cage, being so close to these beasts.

It's funny, to be so fascinated by something and yet afraid as well. One of the reasons I love Amanda is that she refuses to be paralyzed by her fear. Having a front row seat to her courage for the last 13 years has taught me what it looks like to stand up to fear and take a chance on love.

Today, we're going to explore the power of love - specifically the power of love to overcome fear. Fear so often seems like the most powerful force in our world, but the truth is that love is, and always has been, infinitely stronger.

# Message

Welcome to Journey to Love. We're in a 40-day experience that lies at the very core of our human existence. For the next couple of months, we're gathering here in this group and also in our small groups to answer together some of the most basic questions we ask as humans:

How do we love well?

And How do we *receive* love well?

We began with our friend Matt Mikalatos, the author of the book we're using as a guide in our journey. Matt invited us to prepare to set out. He invited us simply to 'show up', to agree to participate in this journey. We saw how to spot love, and also how to spot what love is not.

Today, I want to ask the question, "How powerful is love?"

I think we all know the right answer is supposed to be, "Love is the most powerful thing in the world." But if we're being honest, it doesn't *feel* that way most of the time. We're bombarded by fear - told constantly to be afraid of the government, people we don't know, other countries, immigrants, people who don't look like us... the list goes on and on.

We fear for our jobs, our health, our kids, our future. And love just seems... well it seems pretty anemic when faced with all that. After all, how can we possibly *love* our way out of all this mess?

Part of the problem has been with how we imagine love. When we talk about fear vs love, we often end up imagining holding hands in a circle and singing kum bye ya, or simply being nice to people regardless of how they behave. We mistake calm for peace.

So today, let's explore some of what the Scripture says Love is, and how it truly is the most powerful force in the universe.

Turn with us to [1 John 4](#).

This is a letter written near the end of the first century, about 50 years after Jesus was raised from the dead. The church community has been struggling. They've faced both infighting and external pressures to renounce the way of Jesus. Their spiritual leaders are giving them conflicting instructions. They're all struggling to know what is right, what the true way of God is.

Sound familiar?

Into this, an elder church leader named John writes to them. And rather than giving them a bunch of complex arguments or teachings, he begins the letter by saying, "Remember Jesus?" Everything we know about God begins with him. It flows from him.

By the time we get to chapter 4, John has taken us on a winding, poetic tour through God's love for us. He weaves in and out of that core truth - that God is most essentially love - and the practical implications of that truth for how we live together in this world.

We're reading from the First Nations Version today, which is a translation of the New Testament done by Native Americans.

My much-loved friends, love each other, for love comes from the Great Spirit. All who love have been born of him and know him. Those who do not love do not know him, for the Great Spirit is love. Creator showed his love for us by sending the only Son who fully represents him into this

world, so that we could live through him. This is love, not that we loved Creator, but that he loved us and proved his love by sending his Son to take on himself the burden of our broken ways.

John insists that God *is* love. This is important for us here at Catalyst. Our conviction that God is most essentially self-giving love is the heart of our theological tradition. And we believe that the most complete expression of God's love is Jesus' death on the cross.

How did Jesus face the evil of the world? By giving his own life to swallow up the power of death. Jesus saved us by loving us.

*This* is where love begins: with the realization that the first thing that was ever true about us was that God loved us.

And if we can begin to receive that truth, it transforms how we face the world around us:

My much-loved friends, if Creator loved us like that, then we should also love each other. No one has ever seen the Great Spirit, but as long as we love each other, he remains in us, and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he lives in us because Creator has shared his Spirit with us. We have seen and now tell you the truth about what our Father the Great Spirit has done. He sent his Son to be the Sacred Deliverer of the world. Those who tell others that Creator Sets Free Jesus is the Son of the Great Spirit are the ones Creator lives in, and they live in him.

We have come to know and trust the love Creator has for us. The Great Spirit is love. He remains in those who love and keep on loving, and they remain in him.

Learning to receive God's love is how we love others around us. When we learn to remain in God's infinite love for us, we learn how to show that same powerful love to the world around us. And John makes a potent observation about what happens to all that fear we feel about the world:

Love is made complete in us so that we will stand without fear on the day Creator decides who has done right or wrong. For in this world, when we love as he loves, we are just like him.

Where love is there can be no fear, for mature love drives all fear away. Fear comes from the thought of punishment. So love has not yet matured in those who continue to be afraid. We love because he first loved us. -- 1 John 4:7-19 (FNV)

Mature love drives all fear away. The more we love, the bolder we become.

Love overcomes fear. Love swallows fear.

Even a fear of sharks.

About a month ago, Amanda and I had the chance to dive with whale sharks. Whale sharks are the largest species of shark - adults can be up to 40' long. But unlike great whites, hammer

heads and other 'scary' sharks, whale sharks eat krill - the microscopic crustaceans in the oceans. They have huge mouths, but their throats are smaller than a ping pong ball.

That didn't stop Amanda from being afraid, though. After all, a shark is a shark. And her rational mind could tell her all she wanted that this was a totally safe, exciting experience. But her lizard brain wouldn't listen.

Like I said, though, she's never let her lizard brain stop her.

We got on a boat with eight other adventurers plus our crew of three. We sped for about an hour out into the ocean, seeking out the nutrient-rich, krill-filled currents the whale sharks love.

As we went, our guide told us what to expect: our captain would navigate the boat in front of the shark, swimming below the surface. In the meantime, two-by-two and in snorkels, fins and life-vests, we'd be hanging over the side of the boat, waiting for him to shout, "Now! Now!"

At that point, we'd drop into the ocean and swim alongside the creature for as long as it would tolerate us.

That sounded well and good until we found one of the sharks.

It didn't occur to us that there would be something like 50 excursion companies, all with boats full of divers seeking sharks. So when we found one, we were in the midst of a churn of 15-20 other boats, all loaded with people dangling over the side, hoping to dive in. The air smelled of gasoline and the water was very rough from all the boats moving every which way. All you could hear was the various captains shouting - at their divers, at their crews, at each other. It was chaos (a number of us got sick).

By the time it was our turn, I was starting to wonder if it was worth it at all.

But I followed Amanda to the side of the boat - at least with my mask on, I couldn't smell the fumes!. I hung my legs over the side of the boat, gripping a post so the rocking didn't fling me off. And then our captain was shouting, "Ahora! Ahora!" and I threw myself into the waves.

It was like someone pressed a mute button on reality. All sound vanished and I was suspended in a perfectly blue ball. Everything was so peaceful the transition was almost shocking.

[\[Video\]](#) And then I saw the creature.

Probably 20 feet long, stretched out below us, existing in a world beyond the chaos and smells and shouting.

I was transfixed. The few moments we spent with it below the waves were an eternity, time frozen in the pure majesty of this otherworldly creature.

Hours later, when we were back in our room, Amanda declared, "You know what? I don't think I'm going to have a heart attack when I see that great white!"

Her encounter with this creature had transformed her fear into awe, driven it out completely.

Friends, I have to tell you that in that moment, I was overcome again. I thought back to my time on that boat, in the middle of the chaos. I realized how thoroughly that experience mirrored that fear that so many of us know in our daily lives. We're surrounded by chaos, everyone claiming to have the right answer. It feels like we're all in these little ships, captains circling each other, shouting and trying to avoid collisions. How many of us would agree we feel a little sick at the state of things?

And we wonder whether love really has anything to say to all this.

Which is when John points beneath the waves and says, "Dive in."

Dive into the infinite love of God.

Dive in to find the great mystery, one who is not indifferent to you, but who loves you, who created you and knows you and calls you.

The question John asks us is whether we're truly connected to God. Are we allowing God to love us?

That was the only way John's community could possibly thrive in the world around them. And it's the only way we can return to the chaos of the surface and engage. (We love because God loves us first!)

We can hope because God loves us. We can engage in good faith because God loves us.

## Communion + Examen

Communion is one way we 'dive in'. All God requires is that we show up.

What areas of my life have I acted in love in the last week?

What areas of my life have I experienced fear in the last week?

When in this next week might I encounter fear in this next week?

How can I act in love in this next week?

## Assignment + Blessing

C-groups + Spiritual practices

Love keeps walking even when carrying a heavy load. Love keeps trusting, never loses hope, and stands firm in hard times. The road of love has no end. -- 1 Corinthians 13:7-8 (FNV)