

Welcome

Some of you may remember right before the pandemic when I had knee surgery. I had to put no weight on my knee at all for 2 weeks, and keep my knee elevated as much as possible. In practice, that meant I was laying on my back on our couch for 2 straight weeks - getting up only once or twice a day.

And if you think that sounds terrible, it was. But imagine how much worse it was for my wife. She was amazing - she made a whole basket of foods I could reach without having to get up, and before she left for work every day, made sure I had everything I needed - device chargers, remote controls, etc.

In the evenings, if I needed anything, she was quick to get it. She brought me meals, did all the dishes, did all the household chores. Now: I want to ask a hypothetical question (hypothetical because I'm not going to bring her up to the platform and interview her):

Do you think she *wanted* to do all that?

Like, let's say I'd been out of town. Do you think she would have spent all her freetime doing chores? Do you think her heart's deepest desire was to clean up after me and care for me while I was invalid?

Obviously not. She chose to do those things despite the fact that they're not fun, and not what she would choose to do if she could do anything.

She chose to take care of me because she loved me.

Any of us who have had a friend, parent, kid, spouse or partner who was ill or incapacitated in some way knows what I'm describing.

There's something about love that transforms otherwise disgusting or difficult. Love doesn't make those fun - no one likes cleaning up puke - but somehow these acts of service become small in comparison to the love we have for the other person.

I want to talk about divine love today, and I wanted to begin with that story of Amanda's loving service because it's in acts like that we most clearly see what God's love looks like.

We can't see God, which makes talking about divine love precarious. Acts like this ground us in God's own nature, and help us see the unseen God who loves us!

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. Last week, we meditated on the true power of love in our lives and the world. Last week, we explored barriers that prevent us from loving well.

Today, I want to explore the root of this love we've been talking about. If you've been here during this series, you know we've said again and again that the root of our love comes from God.

I can imagine that might make some folks nervous for a couple of reasons.

First, I know some of us still struggle to connect love with the idea of God. We've been raised in faith traditions that depict God as something other than loving. God is disapproving or even abusive - a god who only loves you if you dress a certain way, vote for a particular political party or follow a strict code of behavior.

So the idea that God is love feels a little scary.

Pressing further into this discomfort, I want to revisit a passage we explored earlier in the series. This passage from 1 John asserts that all love comes ultimately from God. Here it is again, from chapter 4:

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. -- 1 John 4:7-10 (FNV)

An implication some Christians take away from the statement that anyone who loves knows God is that only Christians are truly capable of love.

Which is actually pretty messed up, isn't it?

We all know people who aren't people of faith, or who are of a different faith, who embody those fruits of kindness, peace-making, gentleness and more we saw point us to love. We've all (hopefully) experienced love from people who aren't part of the Christian tradition.

On the flip-side, we, unfortunately, all know people who claim to be Christian who are not loving. People who are cruel, selfish, even abusive. So to claim only Christians can love...well, it feels really hypocritical.

No wonder some of us who are thrilled to explore love and who have found this series really meaningful so far might still find talking specifically about divine love a little scary.

So I want to begin with an important word: mystery.

When theologians describe God as a mystery, they don't mean that God is a puzzle we have to solve. That if we're just smart enough, we can figure God out (or that, if we claim to know God, we're claiming to be smarter than people who don't!).

A theological mystery, a divine mystery, is something that is too big for human comprehension. To claim that God is a mystery is to say that God is beyond us. Not unknowable - because as we'll explore in a minute, God makes Godself known to us. But there is always more to God than we realize. God is bigger than any system or structure we create to understand God - including Christianity.

It's why some people who know an awful lot about God aren't actually much like God. And it's why a lot of people who would say they don't even believe in God nevertheless find expressions of divine love erupting from their lives.

So what happens if we allow for the possibility that God is bigger than we can imagine? What happens if we open ourselves to the possibility that the ultimate force in the universe is real and is *for* us?

Remember that John wrote this in his letter:

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. -- 1 John 4:11–14 (FNV)

No one has ever seen God. So how do we know God? Because of Jesus. Jesus shows us who God is. Jesus makes the mystery of God knowable. This is an incredibly important moment I think we don't often give its due:

Jesus is the perfect image of God. The perfect picture of God.

If we want to know who God is, if we want the very best door into the mystery of God, we look to Jesus.

That means any picture of God that *doesn't* look like Jesus is wrong. It's not God. If someone tries to tell you God is like X, but X isn't like Jesus, then that person is wrong.

And first and foremost, what Jesus shows us about God is that God is love.

Turn with us to [John 3](#).

This is a passage we spend a lot of time in here at Catalyst because it's one of this Gospel's great meditations on the nature of Jesus. Who he is, why he came to us and what it means for our relationship to God. Of course [John 3:16](#) is super famous. And I love the way the First Nations Version renders this verse - just different enough to breathe new life into one of the most powerful verses in Scripture:

“The Great Spirit loves this world of human beings so deeply he gave us his Son—the only Son who fully represents him. All who trust in him and his way will not come to a bad end, but will have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony. Creator did not send his Son to decide against the people of this world, but to set them free from the worthless ways of the world.” -- John 3:16–17 (FNV)

Earlier in John's gospel, he made it clear that Jesus *is* God. So it's not that God sent his son as much as it's God sacrificing himself for us. In Jesus, we meet the God who is fully love - the God who gives Godself for us. The God who saw us facing a world of evil and suffering and could easily have left us to it. But instead, God entered into it with us and died in our place.

Did Jesus *want* to die? Obviously not. We know that from the days and hours leading up to his betrayal. His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane where he specifically asks God to make another way. But Jesus went to his death willingly. He embraced the Cross *specifically as an act of liberation for those of us he loves*.

No wonder those first Christians said, “This is how we know God loves us. This is how we know God is for us.”

Can we stop there for a moment?

So many of us have been told that God is angry with us, that what happened on the Cross was Jesus taking God's anger at us - as though God is so furious that he has to smite someone, so Jesus steps in and takes in on the chin.

To hear some pastors tell it, God can't stand the sight of us until Jesus takes our place. Literally, there's a whole theological position that says that until God sees Jesus *instead of us*, God is full of wrath.

Friends: that is toxic, abusive theology. We're right to fear a god like that, to reject a god like that.

Because Jesus shows us *that's not who God is*. The Cross isn't about giving God somewhere to vent his anger or tricking himself into tolerating us.

The Cross is the ultimate demonstration of God's infinite love for us. God loves us, a prized creation that bears God's own image, so much that God would rather die than live without us. God is willing to die to save us from ourselves and from all the forces that wish us harm.

For Jesus, this love has radical implications. Over in [John 13](#), which is John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus began the meal by washing his disciples' feet - which was slave work. Jesus, their master, their teacher, their leader, took the role of a slave and washed their feet.

They didn't know it, but he was acting out in a practical way what he was about to do on the cross. Before they begin their meal, he pauses to make sure they understand he wasn't just being a weirdo:

After he had finished washing all their feet, he put his outer garment back on and sat down again at the table.

“Do you see what I have done?” he said to them. “You are right to call me Wisdomkeeper and Chief—because I am. If I, your Wisdomkeeper and Chief, have washed your feet, then you should wash each other's feet. So follow my footsteps and do for each other what I have done for you.

Jesus says, “See what I just did? That's what you should all do for each other.” -- John 13:11–15 (FNV)

I love that Jesus took time to do this, because it clarifies that ‘self-sacrifice’ isn't just literally dying for each other. It's every chance we have to give up our own position, privilege or power for the good of others. Doing that is divine.

Many of you know my father-in-law Rick passed away a couple of months ago. It happened quickly - he went into hospice care on a Friday and died before the end of the weekend. As you can imagine, the grief Amanda and I felt was indescribable. But the stress only added to the grief. How were we going to get to St. Louis, to be with him and her family? Flights are expensive, especially at the last minute. What about work for her and church for me? We had barely reopened at that point!

What happened next was the most amazing expression of divine love we've ever experienced. Our housemate Sue reached out to a bunch of our friends and collected money to give to us. She said, “You're going to have a lot of expenses in the next couple of weeks. This will help.”

Pam organized people to send meals to us while we were in St. Louis, so we didn't have to deal with daily concerns while we were grieving and planning.

Amanda's work gave her the whole next week off - even though she hadn't even been there a month. Her new coworkers all helped cover for her.

And Nathan and Vanessa here stepped up to ensure we didn't have to worry about anything here. Another good friend got me a hotel room for a night so I could get away and focus on what little work I couldn't shift off until we got back.

We were overwhelmed by the love of our community. And Amanda's family was amazed at the deep love y'all showed for us and for Rick and Lois. It was more powerful than any sermon I've ever preached. It was divine.

Friends, this is what divine love looks like, and it's the love I want to invite you to reflect on as we move toward our time of responding.

Communion + Examen

Jesus set a place for us because he loves us.

How have you experienced God's love through another person's actions?

How have you expressed God's love to someone this week?

Where might you have the opportunity to show God's love to someone else this week?

Assignment + Blessing