

## You Are Loved

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Starting a new series today. We've spoken over the past few months about faith and hope, now we're going to explore the topic of love. Love is a powerful word, isn't it? We talk a lot about things we love, don't we? Sometimes they're straightforward things. Food we love. TV shows we love. Clothes we love. But what about when it comes to people? What about those three little words? "I love you". Those words carry much greater significance, don't they? Back in the depths of time, before I was married, I remember some trepidation about when it was appropriate to use those words in a romantic relationship. Maybe this is just because I'm Northern – we're not known for expressing emotion. But I seem to recall the challenge of when to use those words. How soon is too soon? When do you tell someone you love them? Go too early, you seem too serious, clingy and a bit over-the-top. Wait too long and you're disinterested, disengaged and uncaring. Is it just me or does anyone else remember this struggle?!

Love is a big deal though, isn't it? We know that love really matters. Not the casual use of the word "love" to describe stuff we're moderately keen on. But true love. Real love. The love we feel for another person. As a society, we love love, don't we? Love is a global obsession.

Love songs. Every other song on the radio is about love, isn't it? Falling in love or breaking up – either works as song material. Our favourite songs so often are about love. Love. All you need is love. Love lifts us up where we belong. A million love songs later and here I am trying to tell you... that we love love songs.

Movies. We love love in our movies, don't we? And I'm not just talking about rom-coms. Sure, plenty of people love the "will they won't they" of a good rom-com. Spoiler alert – they will. That's just how these things work. But we love to see love in movies full stop. How many action films have a love story shoehorned in somehow? How many comic book movies have to have at least the hint of love? Maybe the same is true in horror films – I don't know because I don't watch them! But it feels like most movies have a little love in there somewhere.

This is just a continuation, of course, of the artistic traditions through the ages. Long before there were love songs and movies, there was literature and theatre. But love remained all the same. The stage through the years has been littered with love stories – both tragic and triumphant. Many a poem, sonnet and soliloquy have been forged to convey the full range of love.

Love is big business. So is the business of finding love. How many dating sites are there these days? It seems you can hardly go an ad break without seeing one. Can't travel on public transport without noticing one. A hundred different forums to find that perfect match. It's no surprise though really, is it? Because that desire to find that special someone ranks pretty high on most people's list of life goals.

But even those who aren't looking for love with that special someone want to find love somehow – in their family, with their friends; here in church. The highest ideal for many is to love and be loved in return.

The idea of love is so compelling that people will chase love even when it hurts. They'll risk heartbreak and pain for the prospect of love. Tragically, some will even stay in harmful or abusive relationships because they long to be loved. The pull of love is compelling and powerful.

But why? Why is this desire to love and be loved so hardwired into our soul? Why is the desire for love so persistent and pervasive? Where does our fascination and focus on love come from?

Those are the questions we're going to explore today. I think they are fundamental for us moving into this series all about love. We have to understand why we care about love so much if we're to get all we can out of what's to come. Also though, the answer to why will have significant implications for your life.

Being completely honest, if you're someone that's been around church for a while, the answer may seem almost obvious at first. But stick with me – because where we end up has the potential to be hugely significant. If you're fairly new to this environment - maybe you haven't been before or haven't been often, maybe you're still exploring things – you're in just the right place to come with us as we explore this too. You may not agree with everything I have to say, but I think it will at least make you think.

So why do we love love so much?

To answer that question, let's take it back to the start...

**Genesis 1:1** - In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Ok, we don't need to go quite that far back, but its close. To understand inbuilt desire to love and be loved, we do need to go back to the creation account. To the beginning of man; and of man's relationship with God.

**Genesis 1:26-27** - 26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

These words describe the creation of humankind. Mankind here is described here as special, set apart from the rest of the living creatures. There are two fundamental elements here that help us to understand our desire to love and be loved.

Firstly, the template used for our creation is God Himself. "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness". Humanity is created in the image of God. This is of key importance

where love is concerned. Elsewhere in Scripture, in 1 John 4, we are told that God is love. Love is not something God just does. It is not a pastime, a hobby or job for God. God IS love. Love is inbuilt into the character of God, the nature of God, the very fibre of His being. Humanity then, created in His likeness, is likewise created to love.

Secondly, what was God's purpose in creating humanity? Does God create humankind just because He needs us to do something? God clearly outlines a role for us in His words here – to “rule over” the fish and the birds and the animals – but is that our sole purpose? Are we servants then? Slaves even? No, because we are created with free will. Now tell me, if you wanted someone to definitely do something, would you give them free will? Would you make it possible for them to choose whether they did it or not? That doesn't seem like the most efficient way of getting the job done, does it? Yet God give us free will. Why? Because we were not just created to rule over the plants and animals, we were created for relationship with God. That relationship requires free will. You cannot love if you cannot make a choice. You can obey; you can follow – but you cannot love. We are given free will so we are free to love.

Not though out of any deficiency in God Himself. Have you noticed that the verses we read refer to God speaking in plurals – “let us make mankind in our image”? Is God having some split personality thing here?! Well, no. The words here reflect the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is significant - it shows that God was already in relationship with Himself. He did not need us to make Him complete – we do not fill some absent gap of relationship. God does not need us, but He wants us. If anything, we are created out of an overflow of God's love.

I think it was CS Lewis who suggested that if a well overflows, it is not in any way deficient. It is abundant. So too with God. He overflows in love for us. He creates humanity not because He lacks love, but because He so abounds in it.

It is so important that we begin with this understanding. For reasons we shall explore, we have to start all the way back here to understand our desire to love and be loved. To see that we were created in the image of love; to know that we were created for relationship. To recognise too the order of the interaction. We did not love first, we were loved first.

In 1 John, the same letter in which we find the words “God is love”, the writer John sums it up:

**1 John 4:10** (NLT) - 10 This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

We are not the initiators. We are not the pioneers. We are not the starting point. God is. Real love is not that we loved God, but that He loved us. Love does not begin when we choose to love; instead it begins when we recognise that we are loved. We'll talk more about the significance of that difference in a few minutes. But first, it is important that we recognise that not only were we created in the image of love, out of an overflow of God's love; but that God continues to love us.

This verse speaks of how God sent His Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Sin can seem like a religious word. It is one we may have heard used often, even if we're not normally someone who goes to church. Sin most simply means to miss the mark. It is all the times when our lives have not lived up to God's perfect standard. We've all done it. We're all conscious, I imagine, of times when we have done what is wrong or not done what is right. All that stuff should be a barrier to our relationship with God. God cannot allow His perfection to be tainted by our imperfection.

Yet He never stopped loving us; never stopped wanting to be part of our lives. We ourselves are incapable of dealing with sin. No matter how hard we try, we cannot stop sinning. Our best efforts like dirty rags compared with the glory of God. So Jesus Christ comes to do what we could not do. To live a perfect sinless life. To offer His life in our place – the sacrifice for our sins. To clear away the barrier; to bridge the chasm of sin between us and God.

The same man who wrote this letter, John, was a follower of Jesus – indeed, he was one of Jesus' closest friends. He wrote His account of Jesus' life. In it, we find perhaps the most well-known words in all of the Bible, as quoted by Pastor Tom last Sunday, and by countless others across the generations...

**John 3:16-17** - 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jesus gave up His life on the cross, but He did not stay dead. Death had no hold on Him. The grave was only borrowed. He rose again to life three days later – creating a new way for each and every one of us – a way back to relationship with God. He came not to condemn, but to save. To make it possible for every man, woman and child to know a personal relationship with God.

This then is the highest expression of God's love. I love the word "so" in this sentence. It indicates that in this manner God showed His love for us; but as JB Phillips and others have highlighted it also indicates how much God loved us. We need to be conscious of this. Even if we have heard this verse a hundred times before, we should not lose sight of the significance and power of it. Not only were we created in the image of love, out of an overflow of love; not only were we created for relationship with God; but God valued that relationship so much – loved us so much - that Jesus willingly gave His life to make a way back to God. Despite all we do wrong, God never stopped loving us.

For those who are not often found in church, those words may be revolutionary. Perhaps you came with a perception of God as judgemental or distant. A thought that God looks down on you; or disregards you entirely. Yet we see here how much God loves us.

For those often found in church, there is danger that we have lost sight of how revolutionary this love is. We can so easily get caught up in our routines and habits, but lose sight of the pure power of God's love. We can use the word Christian to identify ourselves, yet lose a conscious recognition of all that truly means. We can live day to day under a

shadow of guilt and shame or self-doubt and uncertainty, instead of enjoying the conscious understanding that God loved us from the start and continues to love us to this day.

They say fear is the enemy of faith; but I think familiarity can be just as dangerous. If you read through the Gospels – the accounts of Jesus’ life – it is often those who are familiar who miss out, not those who are afraid. I think we can grow so familiar with hearing about God’s love that we lose sight of what it really means. Yet perhaps the most powerful thing we can understand about love is not about how we can love, but about how we are loved. God’s love for us is mind-blowing in its scale and scope; unrivalled in its power and potency; almost unimaginable in its significance.

Along this theme, Paul, one of the great leaders of the early church, writes of how he prays for the church in Ephesus to understand the full scale of God’s love. He’s in a tough spot, but he asks them not to worry. Instead, he says...

**Ephesians 3:14-19 (NIV)** - 14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul’s prayer is that we would be “rooted and established in love”. That we would “grasp” – meaning to seize or take firmly – “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”. “To know this love that surpasses knowledge”. What a great turn of phrase. Paul wants us to know something, even though he knows it goes beyond what we can know. He’s saying it’s too big for you to fully get it, but I want you to get it as much as you can.

This verse is so good it warrants reading in another translation...

**Ephesians 3:14-19 (NLT)** - 14 When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, 15 the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. 16 I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. 17 Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. 18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. 19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

This translation highlights not only the scope of God’s love, but the impact of it. Paul highlights how we find strength in the love of God – “your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong”. Strength, but also satisfaction – fulfilment – “made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God”.

You may well know the words that come just after this. Indeed, Pastor Tom quoted them last week. To read again from the NIV...

**Ephesians 3:20-21** - 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

As Paul continues, his words all but become a prayer. He writes of how God is able to do more – immeasurably more – than all we ask or imagine. He writes of “his power that is at work within us”. He writes of God finding glory in the church, across the generations. And he finishes with a powerful amen.

Amen simply means “so be it” or “let it be”. I love the triumphant way that Paul finishes here. It is almost like this is the end of his letter. The epic climax. Yet it actually isn't. This is only halfway through the book! To me it feels like Paul almost gets carried away by what he is writing. His words about the expansiveness of God's love becoming a prayer that God's people would know the power of God at work in their lives.

I don't think it is any coincidence here that God's love flows on to God's power. They are inextricably intertwined. The greatest expression of God's creative nature was humankind – fashioned and formed out of love, to represent the image of God who is love. His greatest act of power – the resurrection of Jesus – was necessitated by love, to re-establish the love of God in our lives. God's power and love are inextricably linked. So too strength – the courage and capacity to keep on going, even through trials and troubles – is rooted in the love of God. As is satisfaction – the fulfilment found in God's love – we are “made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God”.

This is why we had to start here today. If we want to fully understand and explore what love is all about, we have to begin with the love of God. If I'm really honest, I wanted to speak about something else. I began writing a message about how we should love, but it just wouldn't come together. I realised then that we could not begin this series with how we should love. It doesn't not start with how we love; it starts with how we are loved. We are not the initiators. We are the recipients. Power, strength, fulfilment – all is found not in how we love; but how we are loved. This life does not begin when we know how to love; it begins when we know that we are loved.

What then would happen if you let the love of God frame your life? It strikes me that the words Paul uses are like a frame – the boundaries of each edge defined by the love of God. (Draw on flipchart). How high, how deep, how wide, how long. Within the borders are all the strength and power and fulfilment that we will ever need. What if we let the love of God frame our life?

What if how loved we are defined us? What if how loved we are set the scale of our ambitions? What if how loved we are set the standard for how we interact with others? What if how love we are defined how we see ourselves?

You may say “I want something else to define my life”. You may be an ambitious person – eager to succeed in your chosen field. Driven, motivated. You want to be remembered for your success. Remembered because you reached the top of your chosen field. Maybe you

don't see love as the way to get there. Maybe it is skill and talent that you feel is required. Maybe you're of the view that with enough hard work you can achieve success and renown.

But what if success doesn't equal satisfaction? What if fame doesn't equal fulfilment? We are probably all aware of people who reached the top of their chosen field, yet still felt something was lacking. Of those who reached the height of fame, the pinnacle of success, yet were unsatisfied. We've probably heard the cautionary tales of those who sacrificed everything else to get to the top— who won big in business or achieved great fame, yet at the cost of their relationships, their family, their marriage or even their happiness. What happens too when you run out of motivation? What happens when the drive runs down? Can we really sustain ambition in and of itself indefinitely? What happens when our skill and talent begins to wane?

I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with striving for success; nothing wrong with ambition. Not necessarily even anything wrong with fame. But what if there is something higher that can define you? What if there is something more satisfying, more enduring, more fulfilling? What if love trumps all other aspirations?

Likewise, you may not have a sense of where you want to go in the future, but you may know the kind of person you want to be known as. You may not want to be known for love necessarily. Maybe you want to be known for being smart. Maybe you want to be known for being talented. Maybe you want to be known for being funny. Innovative. Creative. There are probably lots of words we might want to define us. But what if we started off knowing that we were loved? It wouldn't contradict those other assets, but it would augment them. We wouldn't have to lay aside who we are, but it'd make us better at it. What would it do to our confidence to know what we were loved? What would it do to our sense of value? What would it do to our sense of security? It'd be like rocket fuel for our sense of self.

God's love is not seasonal or sporadic – it is constant and consistent.

God's love does not go out of fashion; it will never go out of style.

God's love is not rendered obsolete when technology changes. It is not outdated by developments in science or pushed aside by the next big thing.

God's love does not flicker or fade; it does not falter in the face of difficulty.

God's love endures; it empowers; it enlightens; and it overcomes.

The picture painted by Paul is of a life strengthened and empowered by an understanding of the love of God. It speaks of an inner resilience and fulfilment found when you know that you are loved by God. But there is also an expansiveness – a scope and scale so high and wide and deep and long that we can never quite comprehend it; yet we can experience a love that propels us forward into a much bigger life than we can imagine.

What if – above all else and through all else – what if the love of God framed your life?

I've quote a number of times today from John. John was one of Jesus' closest disciples. One interesting quirk about John is how he refers to himself in his gospel account. All the other disciples John calls by name. But John does not use his own name or refer to himself as "me" or "I". Instead John refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". I wonder how

the other disciples would've felt about that! (If indeed any of them were alive to see John's words written down.) But what a wonderful way for John to refer to himself. The disciple Jesus loved.

If we are to frame our lives with God's love – perhaps we need to take the same approach. We need to start to refer to ourselves as loved by God. Not in our outward dialogue necessarily, but internally. We talked at the start of those three little words “I love you”. But what if we developed a habit of using three little words to speak to ourselves instead: “you are loved”? What if we regularly reminded ourselves “you are loved”?

There are all sorts of ways and times you could do this. As you wake in the morning, and as you go to sleep at night remind yourself “you are loved”. Whenever you look in a mirror – “you are loved”. As you head out the door to work or uni or school – “you are loved”. Maybe you could set those words as the lock screen on your phone; or write them somewhere you'll see them often.

There may be certain situations where you want to consciously remind yourself of those words too. When you're feeling stressed – “you are loved”. When faced with a difficult or challenging situation – “you are loved”. If you start to doubt yourself – “you are loved”. If you're being treated unfairly – “you are loved”. It begins with a conscious decision to remind yourself of those words. But done often enough, over and over, those three words will begin to frame your life. “You are loved”.

This understanding could profoundly change you. It is very hard to lack confidence if you're consistently reminding yourself that you're loved. Whether you like your job or not, you're much more likely to feel fulfilled day in and day out if you're reminded that you're loved. When faced with difficult or challenging circumstances, it is hard to entirely lose heart if you know you're loved. The way you treat others will change too. Because when you know you're loved, it influences the way you interact with people. Life doesn't instantly become easy necessarily, but it does begin to change, once you live with a constant, consistent consciousness that you are loved by God.

As we draw to a conclusion, there is much more to cover in this series about love. We could speak about it for a hundred weeks and barely scratch the surface. But today, let's begin not by asking how we can love, but by recognising how we are loved. God's love is so big and high and wide and deep and long that we can never fully comprehend it – yet we can experience it in some way each day. Within that love, we find fulfilment and strength, we find confidence and value; we unlock the power of God that is beyond anything we can ask or imagine. What would happen if that love, above all else, framed our lives?

What if it framed not just our lives, but those of the people around us? What might it do in Norwich if people began to grasp hold of this love? How many people would find fresh confidence and self-worth? How many arguments would be ended? How many fears dismissed? How much hate would cease to exist? We are the ones who will carry this love to our city. But the first step is to take hold of it ourselves. What would happen if the love of God framed your life? Don't wait any longer before you find out the answer – decide this

week to frame each day, each challenge, each moment with those three words: “you are loved”. Let’s frame our lives with the love of God.