



Week 7: Freedom to Love
Read Galatians 5:1-6:18

This lesson is about two things:

- The source and origin of love
- Paul’s description of love, as evidenced by his admonitions to the Galatians

The comedy movie “Wedding Crashers” is the (rather inappropriate) story of John Beckwith and Jeremy Grey (played by Vince Vaughan and Owen Wilson) who are committed womanizers and spend their time attending weddings uninvited to take advantage of the romantic longings of women at wedding services. In one scene, the two guys have crashed a wedding service, and quietly post a wager with one another:

Father O’Neil: “And now for our second reading I’d like to ask the bride’s sister Gloria up to the lectern.”

John Beckwith: “20 bucks First Corinthians.”

Jeremy Grey: “Double or nothing Colossians 3:12.”

Gloria Cleary: “And now a reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians...”

I couldn’t help but laugh, as so many of the weddings I officiate include one of these two passages. They are both from the apostle Paul, and both are about love, and both are wonderful passages to be read at weddings. But these are not the only readings that would be appropriate at weddings, because love is the primary theme of a great many of Paul’s writings, as well as a subject in almost any early church writings for that matter. Consider the following word counts in the New Testament. Below are the top eight scriptural terms in the New International Version:¹

Jesus	1273	Father	390
God	1244	Faith	254
Lord	618	Heaven	236
Christ	530	Love	232

¹ http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_WordCount.htm

A simple glance at the numbers reveals the key concerns of the early church writers: 1) The Christian way is about God made known to us in Jesus, sovereign (Lord) and Messiah (Christ). 2) We can experience the presence of God through faith. 3) We live out that faith in love. Note that we find the word “sin” only half as many times as love, and “hell” only 17 times.

Let’s take a look at Paul’s understanding of love. We will look first at Galatians, particularly chapters 5 and 6, and then in other of the letters of Paul. And we will consider first, the origin of love, and second, the character of love.

Love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We considered in our last lesson and sermon the oppositional relationship of flesh and the Holy Spirit, noting that the Holy Spirit produces a significant change in the way we live. The Holy Spirit, the presence of God that dwells within us and among us, leads to new attitudes, new patterns of thought, new behaviors, and is manifested first and foremost in the way we deal with one another. The Spirit-driven cluster of attitudes, thoughts and behaviors that are directed at neighbors is called “love.” It is the first and foremost fruit of the Spirit. It is the one sure mark of the Christian life.

When I was in seminary, I was required to write as the culmination of my theological studies a document entitled “Credo,” which means “I believe.” The systematic theology class professor who read and provided critique of my thesis was Dr. Schubert Ogden. Ogden is a renowned process theologian, known for his blunt and sometimes intimidating ways. (He once called on me in class to answer a question, and after my answer said, “that is just muddy thinking,” turning away in disgust. On the other hand, he was the first one to show up to help a student who had suffered a real tragedy... so go figure.) The “Credo” is a student’s understanding of fifteen basic doctrines of the Christian faith, compared and contrasted to both Scripture and major theologians of the church. One of those doctrines is “pneumatology,” or the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In my credo, I propose that the Holy Spirit is, very simply, love itself. Frankly, I thought I made a pretty good case for it. Dr. Ogden, on the other hand, wrote the following in red in the margin: “No. It seems you haven’t read the New Testament.” I will say he doesn’t pull any punches.

I suppose Dr. Ogden was right in the sense that there is far more to the Holy Spirit than love, and to try make the Holy Spirit’s work only about love may inappropriately narrow the character of God to one lone aspect of that character. It may diminish other aspects of that character – for example, justice and glory. Furthermore, one could argue that Paul’s argument is that the Holy Spirit produces love, but is not love itself. The Holy Spirit is a person of the Trinity, not a “what,” but a “who.”

Nonetheless, it does seem to me that love is the single lynchpin of all the fruit of Spirit. Last week we pointed out that Paul uses the singular form of the word for “fruit” and employs the verb that matches a singular subject, but then goes on to list more than one attribute. One explanation of this is that the fruit do not grow independently, but together, as a single unit. If we have joy without self-control, it is joy by our own strength rather than joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. But an alternate approach is to see love as the only fruit of the Spirit, and the others as simply descriptors or characteristics of that love. In Koine

Greek, the language in which the New Testament is written, there is no punctuation. (I saw a t-shirt that says “Let’s eat, grandma. Let’s eat grandma. Punctuation matters!)

So what if the sentence was punctuated as follows? “*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*”

With the exception of “joy,” all of the other words are relational, and are clearly aspects of love. And joy, as opposed to happiness, is a byproduct of that love. Note how this would be consistent with Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-6: “*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*” Indeed, love is far and away the most prominent outgrowth of the Holy Spirit working in each of our lives.

Moreover, love is the most prominent outgrowth of the Holy Spirit working in a church family. It is a fruit of the Spirit’s work **among** us, not just within each of us individually. It seems that what upsets Paul so much is the dissension and back-biting in the church he had founded. “*If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*” (Galatians 5:15) In other words, “if you don’t stop this fighting, you will destroy the whole thing!” His despair comes from a sense that when he was with these newly formed churches, there was a palpable sense of the Holy Spirit binding them together. He has already pointed to the signs and wonders the Spirit had been working among them. He is crushed that it seems the Galatians are no longer experiencing the power of the Spirit-driven love binding them together, finding instead the factions and envy that come from trying to follow the law, and from sorting people out by categories like Gentile and Jew.

Love is the active expression of faith.

Paul makes his argument about what really matters in Galatians 5:6b – “the only thing that matters is faith working through love.” This is the next logical step from the first four chapters of the letter. We are justified, made right with God, through faith. So what does this faith lead to? It leads to love.

Love is tied inextricably to faith. It is the natural expression of a true relationship of trust with Christ. The scholars have had some difficulty finding the right translation for the word which links faith and love in this verse. It has been translated as “faith expressed in love,” or “faith enacted in love” or “faith working through love.” The word is “energeo,” and is the origin of the English word energy. Strong’s concordance defines it as follows:

- 1) to be operative, be at work, put forth power
- 2) to work for one, aid one
- 3) to effect
- 4) to display one's activity, show one's self operative

Just as fruit is an outgrowth of a tree, and love is an outgrowth of the Holy Spirit, love is also a derivative of faith. There is one key difference in the analogies: to use the phrase faith “working through love” implies an activity rather than a static state. Love does something; it doesn’t simply hang on a tree. It moves. It changes things. It implies action.

But wait, doesn't love derive from the Holy Spirit, not faith? Both are true, but they come together, and both are involved.

- Faith in Christ → Love.
- The Holy Spirit → Love.

But Paul would argue that

- Faith in Christ → the Holy Spirit's leadership of our lives → Love.

Love is the single summary of the law of God

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Here, Paul is reaching out with an olive branch to the Jewish Christian teachers: the Law, too, leads to love.

In the Old Testament, this golden rule is found in Leviticus: "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*" (Leviticus 19:18) It is a summary of a series of laws regarding how we deal with one another, but is in no way intended to be a full summary of "the law." Instead, the full summary of the law is found in Deuteronomy, in the prayer that is known as "the Shema" (Shema means "hear.") "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" (Deuteronomy 6:5)

Furthermore, it is interesting that Paul doesn't share the whole of the "great commandment" as spoken by Jesus in the gospels (which are written 20 years after Galatians, remember). In the gospels, we read the words of Jesus: "*He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."* (Matthew 22:38-40) It may be that Paul simply assumes the first one by saying the second one. But it is more likely that for Paul, the proper expression of our response to God's love for us is defined by the word "faith" and the proper relationship to one another is defined by the word "love."

We find a similar expression of the relationship between love and the law in Romans 13. Remember that Romans is a more developed and later articulation of Paul's theology than is Galatians. Here we read: "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*" (Romans 13:8-10)

In this section of Galatians, Paul is pointing out that there is a key tie between faith, the Holy Spirit, and the Law; all are designed to lead to love. Note that Paul does not put these on equal footing: Faith in Christ is the door through which the Holy Spirit takes over our lives and our community. The Holy Spirit then produces that love, the key fruit, the mark of faith and the Holy Spirit's work. So we can expand our chart to include all the components of God's work in the world over history:

- The Law → Love. The law of God is summarized by love, although the Law cannot lead to perfect love in and of itself.
- Faith in Christ → Love. Faith is expressed, made active, in love.
- The Holy Spirit → Love. The Holy Spirit produces love as its primary fruit.

Seems to me like a pretty good argument for love.

Love emanates from God the Father

The whole argument leads to one more really obvious question. We see love, even self-giving agape love, at work in so many contexts other than the church, and in so many people other than Christians. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, we saw dramatic examples of sacrificial love, lived out by people of all faith traditions and no faith tradition at all. What is the origin of that love? If love is a derivative of the Holy Spirit and of faith in Christ, where does that so-called “secular” love come from?

The Christian understanding of God is that God is a trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have already elucidated Paul’s understanding of love as born of the Spirit, an expression of faith in Christ, two of the persons of the Trinity. But God the creator is the originator of love, the original spark that began love itself. The first four words of the Bible are “In the beginning, God...” Because God loved the world, God sent the Son to redeem it. Genesis 1 describes creation:

“So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) So each one of us is created in the “imago dei,” the image of God. And the core character trait of God is love. Love was planted in our hearts from the very beginning. Sometimes, that presence of God within all of us is called “common grace.” Sometimes, it is called prevenient grace, the grace that is within us from our creation, seeking to draw us to faith in Christ. That image of God within us has been distorted by sin, but that image still shines through all humankind, and we can catch glimpses if we will just look to see. The flesh wants to turn us away from that higher nature within us, but it is always there, always present, always seeking to be the driving force in each of our lives.

So now our chart is complete:

- God the Father → Love. God is love, and we are created in that image.
- The Law → Love. The law of God is summarized by love, although the Law cannot lead to perfect love in and of itself.
- Faith in Christ → Love. Faith is expressed, made active, in love.
- The Holy Spirit → Love. The Holy Spirit produces love as its primary fruit.

Now that we have understood the origins of love, let’s see how Paul describes it. It is notable that we never find an actual definition of love, only descriptors. Here, Paul describes how people are to treat one another, and that ethos of love is to pervade all of their dealings with one another. Even in 1 Corinthians, where Paul spends all of chapter 13 explaining the importance of love, he provides no actual definition, but only images. It would be impossible to fully explore Paul’s understanding of love here, as there are 106 verses in the Pauline Epistles alone that speak of love. Instead, let’s consider what we see specifically in Galatians.

Love serves

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” (Galatians 5:13)

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

One of the meanings of “slave” here is that of a servant. We have mentioned before that love is an active expression of faith. It isn’t simply a feeling, but it includes action. In Philippians, Paul explores this even more fully, as he challenges the church there to “have the same love.” He then goes on to say we are to *“let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...”*

(Philippians 2:2, 5-7) Paul’s teaching here resonates with that of Jesus, who reminded us that he came not as one to be served, but to serve, and challenges us to do the same.

Love submits.

“... through love, become slaves to each other.” (Galatians 5:13)

Remember that the word “doulos,” is sometimes translated “servant” and other times “slave.” Serving one another seems to be a natural part of love. But the word used here includes a fuller meaning than simply servant. It recognizes that as Christians, we do not belong to ourselves, but rather belong to God. Early in the letter, Paul proclaims that he is a “slave to Christ.” Here, we are asked to “through love, become slaves to one another.” What? Paul has just spent chapters exhorting us to not go back to slavery? Now he is asking us to be slaves to one another? This seem quite contrary to Paul’s claim in chapters 1 and 2 that he owed no submission to the apostles, and certainly not to those of the circumcision faction. Remember, he writes, *“But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us - we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.”* (Galatians 2:4-5) What on earth does Paul mean?

Paul speaks of submission in a number of places in his writings. He says that husbands and wives are to *“submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* (Ephesians 5:21) He says we are to *“submit to the governing authorities.”* (Romans 13:1) The idea of submission is tied directly to the idea of “covenant love.” In the Old Testament, the word that is often used for love is the Hebrew “hesed,” and is translated “steadfast love,” or sometimes “loving kindness.” In the New Testament, there are a number of words for love: “eros” is romantic love, “storge” is affection, particularly in a family, “phileo,” which is friendship love, and “agape.” Agape is used never used apart from the Bible, and it is the New Testament equivalent of hesed, covenant love. When we love others with whom we are in covenant, we recognize that our actions impact others, and that we are a part of something greater than ourselves. We cannot simply decide to do what we want to do without regard for others.

Paul’s greatest chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, is preceded by a chapter in which Paul describes the community of faith as the body of Christ. *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”* (1 Corinthians 12:21,26) We live as people of covenants. We show up at work and do our jobs based on a covenant with our coworkers. We do our chores at home based on our covenant with our family. We participate in the life of the institutional church based on

covenants to which we all agree. And covenants are not simply rules – they are promises based on relationship. When we say through love, we are “slaves to one another,” we are acknowledging that our faith in Christ has led us to willingly submit to a relationship of covenant love with one another, and that we will keep our promises.

Love is humble

“Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” (Galatians 5:26)

“For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.” (Galatians 6:3)

Humility is a key component of love. It is interesting that in the list of the works of the flesh, envy and jealousy are both included. Paul is deeply concerned with the social caste system and the jockeying for position that seems to be going on in the church. We see Paul’s concern for humility throughout his writings. In 1 Corinthians 13, we read, *“love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). The passage of Philippians 2 reads that we are to *“have the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”* For Paul, this overarching theme of love includes humility.

But Paul goes on in Galatians 6:4-5 to add *“All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.”* This is a strange contrast. He has just stated that we are to bear one another’s burdens, but two verses later he says all must carry their own loads. He has just said we are to think of ourselves as nothing, not something, and then he says our own work should be a source of pride.

Remarkably, while these two thoughts are in tension, they remain consistent. Our “testing” should be of self, rather than others. Our judgmental focus should be on our own issues and whether we are carrying our own burdens, rather than whether our sister or brother is holding up his end of the bargain. Paul is echoing Jesus challenge to worry about *“the log in our own eye rather than the speck in our brothers’.”* (Matthew 7:5) When the Holy Spirit, through love, is able to remove our judgmental spirit and our propensity to compare ourselves to others, we will be free to consider the interests of our neighbors above our own, and carry their burdens.

Love is honest

“My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.” (Galatians 6:1-2)

The reader doesn’t have to go very deep into Paul’s letter before he or she realizes that all is not light and happiness in the faith communities. And I am not altogether sure Paul practices what he preaches here – it is hard to discern a spirit of gentleness (especially when he is calling for castration!). On the other hand, Paul knows that issues need to be dealt with. Among the more famous of his writings on this subject is found in Ephesians:

“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every

way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Paul's admonition to restore in a spirit of gentleness seems to parallel speaking the truth in love. Real love doesn't mean avoiding issues, or ignoring the truth. But it does mean that the conversation must happen with a spirit that embodies all the heretofore qualities of love: service, submission, and humility.

Love is inclusive

“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” (Galatians 6:10)

One of the differences between the New Testament agape love and Old Testament hesed is the circle of those who are part of the covenant. Hesed is to be applied to only a particular chosen group of people, although God can choose to include those whom God will choose to include. Agape is a universal unconditional love that is applied to all. It is the love of neighbor, regardless. The question agape seeks to answer is not “who is my neighbor,” which is the question that the lawyer asked Jesus. Rather, agape seeks to answer the question Jesus asked the lawyer in return, “which of these was a neighbor TO the man who was robbed?” It isn't who is in the circle. Rather it is how do we treat one another? Agape expands our privilege and responsibility to love beyond our circle to everyone. Paul has already made clear throughout the letter that Gentiles are not second-class citizens, who have to receive the mark of circumcision to be included in the covenant. Jesus is most interested in loving sinners and tax collectors. Love works for the good of all.

Why then, the qualifier, “especially for those of the family of faith”? It seems that Paul is speaking directly into the challenges of factions and division within the Galatian church communities. Paul is saying, “think win-win here.” Let's figure this out so that Gentiles and Jews, male and female, slave and free all are a part of the experience of love. Your focus should not be on your own people – slaves for slaves and free for free, Jewish Christians caring for “their own kind,” but rather in the church, we don't make those distinctions. The overarching theme of this letter is that we all are the same, no matter what, and all of us come to God through faith.

Love as motive

We have discovered in our conversation that love is faith in action – energeo is the verb. But note that it is not **just** action. Love is not simply doing good for others, but doing it for the right reasons, in the right spirit. Real love combines hands and heart.

Perhaps the most powerful part of 1 Corinthians 13 is the first three verses: *“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”*

The gifts of the Spirit – tongues and prophecies and discernment and miracles of faith – are nothing, if not done for the right reason. All of our generosity and sacrifice is useless, if not done in the right spirit.

I love the musical “Fiddler on the Roof.” There is a marvelous song “Do You Love Me?” It speaks of the energy, the activity and expression, of love. Part of the lyrics are as follows, with Golde singing...

Do I love you?

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes

Cooked your meals, cleaned your house

Given you children, milked the cow

After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

Do I love him?

For twenty-five years I've lived with him

Fought him, starved with him

Twenty-five years my bed is his

If that's not love, what is?

It is a marvelous song, except it doesn't fit with 1 Corinthians 13. While the agape love spoken of in Paul's letter is the eros love between husband and wife, the principle still applies. One can be a marvelous do-gooder in the world, but do it for the wrong reasons in the wrong spirit. And that isn't love. Agape love has no concern for self. Agape love is concerned only with the good of the other. Agape love is love that matches God's love for us.

So... What matters? In Christ, neither circumcision nor lack of circumcision matter at all. The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Sunday School Words

Spend enough time in church or with Christians and you will run across some words that we don't use frequently in our normal day-to-day conversation. However, these concepts are important for understanding Paul's letter and the Christian faith. Each week, we will examine a few of these “Sunday school words” so that they may shed light on the context of the lesson.

Freedom

Freedom is an important concept for Paul, especially in this letter to the Galatians. He uses the Greek word for freedom 28 times in his letters (10 times alone in Galatians), whereas freedom is only mentioned 8 other times in the rest of the New Testament.

Eugene Peterson, in *Traveling Light*, writes that where freedom is concerned, God is always the subject and humans are always the object – for humans to be free, it must be the result of God's actions, not their own. However, in Galatians 5:13, Paul warns against using freedom as an excuse for one to give in to the desires of their flesh, or earthly nature. Because freedom is a result of God's grace and cannot be earned by human action, there were many in the early church who continued to live as though nothing they did mattered. This is a misinterpretation at best, and perversion at worst, of the gospel of salvation by grace.

Law of Christ

In Galatians 6:2, Paul mentions the “law of Christ.” This is the only time this phrase is used in scripture, though the concept is reinforced throughout Paul’s letters. It may seem odd that Paul uses the term law as he has spent much of the rest of this epistle reminding the Galatians that they are free from the law (Galatians 3:13, 5:18). Paul is not just trading one law (law of Moses) for another (law of Christ). Instead, the law of Christ is concerned with freedom and love. In John 13:34, Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This command, or law, of Christ is focused on servant love – just as Christ made himself a servant to others in order to show the depth of his love, we are to do the same. To fulfill the law of Christ is to bear one another’s burdens and work for the good of all (Galatians 6:2,10).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Where have you seen love this week?
2. Explain the difference between agape, phileo, and eros love.
3. Do you agree that all of the attributes of the Fruit of the Spirit are descriptors for love? Are there any others you would add to that list?
4. What do you think of the concept of “common grace” or “prevenient grace”, which is what instills in us the basic ability to give and receive love?
5. Is it possible to love without *energeo*? Can love be static?
6. Have you ever been in a relationship in which you were giving or receiving love that came from the wrong motivation (selfish desires rather than the Spirit)?



Week 7: Freedom to Love

Daily Readings

Week 7: Day 1 - 1 Corinthians 13

Commentary: This passage is often read at weddings – and rightly so – because it describes the highest level of love. It extols the virtues of love that are necessary for a successful marriage. But that is really not how Paul intended it at all. This isn't about the love between two people, but about the whole body of Christ. The stretch is to get outside of the individualism that the passage seems to lend itself to and look at the whole body of Christ.

According to Paul, love is the solution for all corporate church issues. Paul's ethic of love asks, "does it help the other?" Even though prophecy and tongues have their place, they do not build up the church like love does.

Reflection Question: How can we answer the call to the kind of love that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13?

Week 7: Day 2 - John 15:9-17

Commentary: This scripture passage is the embodiment of the *energeia* that Dr. Pace talked about in the weekly lesson. Jesus is not demanding that his followers conjure up love as some emotional sentiment, but that they put their faith to work in love. He gives the example of laying down one's life for one's friends, but that is just one way in which someone can express their love. For Jesus, the important component of love is action.

Reflection Question: What concrete actions have you taken this week that express love to your family and friends?

Week 7: Day 3 - Romans 5:2-5

Commentary: The life of a Christian is marked by hope in the face of suffering – not from naiveté, but from the reassurance that God’s love will sustain us. How does this happen? Through the Holy Spirit, which has been put in each of our hearts. The Holy Spirit, who produces love as its central fruit, is able to sustain us throughout all persecution and suffering.

Reflection Question: Have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your life recently?

Week 7: Day 4 - John 13:35

Commentary: John 13 is a part of Jesus “Final Discourses,” in which Jesus gives final instructions to his disciples before he is crucified. In summing up all of his teachings, love is a central theme. Jesus tells the disciples to love one another as he has loved them, and then he tells them that they will be known by this love – this unconditional, inclusive, welcoming, forgiving love that he modeled.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.”? It is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi and it conveys the heart of this scripture – sharing the message of Jesus is not about fancy sermons or well-constructed arguments; it is about being loving towards your fellow human.

Reflection Question: How can you preach the gospel without words today?

Week 7: Day 5 - Romans 8:37-39

Commentary: There has been a trend for a number of years of men wearing Tungsten wedding bands. Tungsten is generally considered the strongest metal on earth, and the symbolism of having a wedding band made of Tungsten is that one’s marriage is just as strong. In fact, Tungsten is so strong that medical professionals recommend that men do not wear Tungsten rings while performing physical activities in which they could break their fingers – if they do, the doctors in the emergency room will not be able to cut the band off and the entire finger has to be removed.

This picture of strength is an apt metaphor for the strength of the love of God – there is nothing that can come between you and God’s love. Not disability, not illness, not past mistakes, not mental illness, not bad decision-making... nothing. God’s love is so strong that it grasps and holds on to us throughout whatever roller coaster we are on.

Reflection Question: Use this space to journal your thoughts about being connected to God by love that is stronger than you can ever imagine or ever be separated from.