Loving to Thrive

On this New Member Sunday, let's wonder together about loving as a catalyst for thriving – both in our individual lives and as a congregation. Across the month of November, each of us is discerning what financial gift to pledge for 2026 – asking ourselves: what amount would be, for me, a meaningful and reasonable investment to support the life of our church. And alongside this invitation, our Stewardship Team has encouraged us to consider our newly created tagline: "*Connect, Grow, Love*."

And because our vision is one of "*an ever expanding safe harbor where we thrive together as we work with God toward love and justice,"* I have felt drawn to asking us how connecting, growing, and loving support a shared life in which we thrive. I invite us to look back momentarily, as though through a rearview mirror – to see where we've been in these past weeks, which can help us see the path forward.

Two weeks ago, as we celebrated All Saints Sunday, we considered how we are many members or parts of one body, bringing a beautiful variety of gifts or capacities to the collective. In a time when isolation and loneliness are encouraged by our individual-first culture, reinforced by our attachment to screens, and threatening to overwhelm our humanity, church can be a space where we genuinely welcome what each other brings to the project of community. And we can thrive together to the extent that be develop appreciative connections among our unique temperaments, knowledge, skills, and wisdom wrought through lived experience.

Then, last Sunday, we moved from connecting into growing. We considered ourselves branches of Jesus – our vine who connects us through his lived example to our source in the love of God. We heard Jesus' encouragement to maintain a life-affirming connection to his way – so that we will bear fruit.

And we examined both how we are currently growing into more depth and breadth as a congregation and the vital importance of holding ourselves open to new opportunities to stretch and grow (as trees do) into greater depth and breadth. As we stretch, we open ourselves to thriving toward greater health and capacity to bear loving fruit in our own lives and in the life of our church.

So let us enter together into a time of reflection on this crisp mid-autumn morning – a day of covenanting and renewing our covenant as members of one body. We recognize with gratitude our freedom to be gathered for worship – on our live stream and here – on land loved across the ages by First Nations and others and where we are now practicing our way of community. I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in the now and here.

Spirit of God, we want to be more loving toward ourselves, toward those whom we already call neighbor or kin, and toward those who are as yet strangers. Soften our hearts and minds this morning. Expand our perspectives so that we each perceive new ways in which you are nudging us to live out of our rootedness in your love. And help us to keep evolving into the thriving community of faith you have created us to become. We ask all of this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

Friends, what is love? And what is it like to experience love? We often think and speak of love in relational terms – that we give love and receive it. We may experience love as something that is mutual and interdependent – shared in a way that is deeper than the more transactional nature of giving and receiving.

Have you ever heard a saying that goes something like this? We can't give what we don't already have for ourselves. Love of self is foundational to any love we share in with others. Many of us have experienced isolated or continuous struggles with self-love. I appreciate the beautiful words with which Maya Angelou invited us into a spirit of worship this morning:

"Love builds up the broken wall and straightens the crooked path. Love keeps the stars in the firmament and imposes rhythm on the ocean tides. Each of us is created of it and I suspect each of us was created for it."

I hope that we can remember today – remember that each of us is created of love and created for love. I imagine and trust God's love as a creative energy – that spark and affirms the beauty and goodness within each of us. And we need to find grounding in loving relationships with others in order to have our beauty and goodness reflected back to us by those with whom we share care and appreciation.

When a group of us met for Connecting With The Word this past Wednesday, we pondered and vulnerably shared responses to this question: **How has love shown up for you in the midst of a particularly challenging, messy, or painful time?** I encourage us to continue to ponder that question. And if there is one through whom love has shown up for you, consider reaching back to with gratitude and affirmation for the way love has shown up through them.

When I wonder often in my sermons, it comes from having been trained up in a way of leading Sunday school through an approach called Godly Play, developed by an Episcopal priest. That person found a way to create a curriculum to wonder with children about the stories of scriptures. And one of the questions that would be asked each week of the children is: I wonder: what part of this story today is about you? So I wonder: what part of today's readings are about you?

As we look at First Corinthians, I wonder: How does love add such value to your life that, without it, you are nothing?

And how does love affect our living to such an extent that you might believe that love outlasts everything else?

I was particularly curious this week about the portion about being childish or not childish. And I don't' think there are so many spots in our Christian scriptures where Jesus or others are calling us to wonder about our maturity. However, we heard, *"I put away childish things."* Well, sometimes I've wondered, what are those childish ways? Well, I think they are at the start of the reading. We heard what love is not: "*envious… boastful… arrogant… rude… insisting on our own way… irritable; keeping a record of wrongs…"* Is anyone else feeling convicted (as I am) in this list of childish things? "…*rejoicing in wrongdoing."* Love helps us to put away the childish ways of being.

And we hear the beloved words at the end of the reading: "*now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love."* Well, why is it the greatest? I think, perhaps, because it is foundational to the others. There are a couple of things St. Paul says that I think encapsulate what hope and faith are.

Hope seems to be about investing in the unfolding possibility of that for which we long. He writes, *"For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face."* Hope keeps us going – into the unfolding possibilities.

Faith is about trusting and seeking that which is beyond our comprehension He says, *"Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."* Faith trusts and seeks the love of God that is beyond our comprehension – trusting and seek to be fully known and knowing fully.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment to bring to mind someone with whom you long to mature in your way of love – be it yourself or someone else in your life. Welcome that person with whom you would like to share more mature love – more deeply rooted love. And let's hear the difficult words before the words of grace.

Poet John O'Donohue mirrors to us in these words:

"When the gentleness between you hardens
And you fall out of your belonging with each other,

When no true word can be said, or heard,
And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,
When even the silence has become raw and torn,

When the weave of affection starts to unravel
And anger begins to sear the ground between you…"

I invite you to open your eyes, being gentle with yourself in that pain that we feel in the searing and tearing – either with another or with ourself.

Let's bring this reflection to a close considering how grace is available and part of love.

O'Donohue also wrote:

"Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,
To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,
Reach out with sure hands
To take the chalice of your love,
And carry it carefully through this echoless waste
Until this winter pilgrimage leads you
Towards the gateway to spring."

Grace is possible. It is what makes space for love to grow.

We need to recognize how we ourselves and those for whom we care will receive love. We need to grapple deep within our sold to understand that there are many ways to share it.

I found song lyrics coming to mind this week – from a song from Snow Patrol called “Chasing Cars.” There is depth to the emotion of these words. The vocalist sings:

“I don't quite know
How to say
How I feel
Those three words [I love you]
Are said too much
They're not enough…
I need your grace
To remind me
To find my own”

Let’s be on the lookout for those in our lives who model grace and spacious love for us. That way we can express it deeply within and toward one another – coming from a place of having it (self-love) and sharing it. Love is counting on working through us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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1 Corinthians 13:1-13, “For Love In a Time of Conflict”