

Discovering Love Again for the First Time – Chapter 7 - Rev. Cindy Gregorson

There they were, gathered around the table.

This would've been a familiar experience— Passover had its customs and rituals. They would've experienced them since childhood.

In their three years of traveling with Jesus, they would've often been at table eating, laughing, listening to Jesus teach. It could have been a meal like any other meal.

It could have been a Passover, like any other Passover, but it wasn't. Something was shifting, changing. Jesus knew what they did not. This would be the last time that they would be together in this way. A chapter was ending. Everything soon would be different.

So, Jesus took this opportunity in one last time of teaching to remind them of everything he had tried to instill in them over the last three years. The heart of this teaching is recorded in John 13:34:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The mark of a disciple is love.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, defined a Methodist as someone who has love filling the heart and governing their life. A Methodist is a person who wants to experience love, and to love as Jesus loved more than anything in life. This is the holiness of heart and life that we aspire to, and it is the path to joy. As Jesus told the disciples that last Passover night together,

"As the father loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love, abide, (do not forsake, stay rooted, dwell) in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I've kept my father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

And what is this commandment we are to keep? Jesus says it again just in case we missed it, and the disciples missed it.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you."

Paul Chilcote, in chapter seven of *Multiplying Love*, says the possibilities of how God's love can show up in our lives and how we can love others are endless. But he also says, we are unable to sustain such love without discipline, practice, and teamwork. Furthermore, he states that we perennially need to discover that love again, as if for the first time. That is the "abiding" that Jesus talks about. We need to continually open ourselves to fresh experiences of God's love, letting our hearts and lives be filled with a sense of belovedness that is new every morning, and then actively reach out and connect with others, offering and

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extending love. We need to never let it get old, stale or rote. And that means tending to it, fanning the flame of love through discipline, practice, and teamwork. Jesus, in his final discourse in the gospel of John, was calling his disciples to this way of love and reminding them that that's what it takes to live this love.

It requires teamwork that they need to stay together. He prays for their unity. He begs them to love one another.

He knows they'll get it wrong, and that's why it's a practice. I mean, Peter got it wrong that very night after Jesus washes his feet and Peter pledges his loyalty, and then fear gets the better of Peter. And he denies knowing Jesus after Jesus is arrested. But who does Jesus seek out after his resurrection, Peter? And what is the question he asked Peter? "Do you love me? And when Peter says, "Yes, yes, yes," Jesus responds, "Well then I have a mission for you, Peter. Feed my sheep." (John 21:17 CEB) The practice of love is rooted in forgiveness, forgiving ourselves when we get it wrong, forgiving others when they fall short, remembering that we are loved no matter what, and committing ourselves to the way of love once again.

And finally, Jesus reminds us this is a discipline. It's a choice we make over and over again to serve one another, to choose love, even when we don't feel loving, to trust that the Holy Spirit will be there just as Jesus promised and will give us what we need to keep his commandment to love.

So where are you today? Do you feel deeply connected to that sense of God's love and confident in your ability to love others? Are you living a life of love and word and deed? There is much in our world that might cause one to pull in, to focus on oneself, to be overcome with despair.

And if circumstances have you feeling far from that sense of love, pervading your life and our world, and you are yearning for it to be fresh and alive and real, filling your heart and governing your life, well, Chilcote invites us to reconnect and recommit to what he calls six movements of the Spirit. These are places and practices where the Holy Spirit can meet us quicken our heart, help us to discover love again, as if for the first time. He names them as Living Word, Saving Faith, Holistic Spirituality, Accountable Discipleship, Formative Worship, and Missional Vocation. I want to highlight just two of these.

The first is scripture. We can encounter God fresh and new in the old, old story. Scripture is a Living Word, and a practice that I find especially helpful in letting scripture speak to me is one called *Lectio Divina*, which means divine reading. The practice is simple. You choose a small portion of scripture, you read it three times. The first time you read it, you underline a word or a phrase that captures your attention. After the second reading, you meditate on that word or phrase and ask, why is that particular word or phrase speaking to me today? How is it intersecting with my life? What am I curious about as I ponder it? And finally, you read the scripture for a third time and ask yourself, what is the invitation from God to me in this scripture text? If I'm to take this scripture seriously, what am I invited to change, do, or be? You may want to journal your response or be in prayer about it, letting God speak to your heart.

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And it's amazing when you do, how your heart can be opened and you experience fresh God's love and attention for you in the world, when you come to scripture, seeking to hear a word from God for you this day. Lectio Divina can be done alone or in community. And let me say, in community, it makes it even more powerful. What we know as the Bible was first a story told over and over for a community, a people of God so they could understand how they came to be the people of God. That who is this God who has called them and named them, and how are they to live? So this story was then written down and preserved in a canon we know as the Bible. And again, it was for the community— first for the synagogue, and then for the church. And therefore it's best interpreted and studied in community. We ask one another, "What are you hearing?" We test the spirits in community of this is where I think God may be leading me, calling us as a community. Does that fit with our understanding of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience?

Which leads me to the second movement that I want to highlight— Accountable Discipleship. What John Wesley understood was that growth and grace and love was only possible when we live out our faith in intimate communities of love. For the early Methodists, this was the class meeting, and in those meetings, they were called to watch over one another in love, and that included asking each time they gathered, "How is it with your soul? How are you keeping the commandment to love? Are you doing no harm? Where are you actively doing good? How are you staying in love with God?" In these class meetings, they gave an "accounting" of their discipline, their practice, their teamwork. "Where two or three are gathered," Jesus said, "I am there." Christianity was never meant to be a solo endeavor, and neither was Christianity ever meant to be "just a me and Jesus" kind of thing. The purpose of those class meetings was to form us in our discipleship so that we could go out and witness and service to fulfill our mission to offer Christ in Word and deed. We are to be God's agents of love in the world, and when we are, love expands within and among us.

Our world is shifting and changing. Can you feel it? I can. And our beloved United Methodist Church has also gone through enormous disruptions these past few years. We are in need of restructuring and renewal for sure. And what the future holds? Well, that's uncertain, but one thing I know, the world needs love. We need love. People are hungering and thirsting for love, yearning for relationships to be healed, desiring to find a way of love that allows us to see and cherish our common humanity and the sacredness of life.

However the form of church may be changing, the mission of the church endures.

This is what Jesus was seeking to instill in his disciples that night long ago. How they will be together has to change if the fullness of God's love is going to be shared with the world. Jesus needed to let go of this life for what God could and would do through his death and resurrection, so that we would know a love so expansive that nothing could stop it. But the mission to love one another? That does not change. It is what God has made possible in Jesus Christ.

Today is Holy Thursday. It is on this day that we enter into that Great Mystery— for God so loved you, God so loved me. And not just you and me, but the whole world, the whole wide world and God's love was and

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is so deep, so wide, that God gave, that God set aside God's divinity become human, to be born a child in humble surroundings, to live and dwell among us. And just at the peak of that life, that teaching and ministry and following, to lay it all aside again, to enter into the fullness of our human experience, suffering and death, so that we would know the depths of God's love. But even more, to see what God could do by raising Jesus from the dead to give us a life and a love that is stronger than death. God did this so that all who believe, who put their trust in this God initiative and God provision of love, who would abide in God's love, would have a life. God sent Jesus, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

This is an ancient truth, but this love of God for us, with us, in us, it is still real happening today. So friends, may we once again discover love the agape servant, love the life changing love of Jesus all over again, and may we live it and share it with others.

How will they know that we are Jesus' disciples? They will know us by our love.