

This morning we are going to continue in our teaching series on Loving Relationships and it is my intent to shine the spotlight on the subject of “love”. Now love is one of those subjects that all of us know something about; all of us have some firsthand knowledge. And this is precisely why it is such a dangerous subject. All too often we experience such brokenness in love, and yet we make our experience the measuring stick or definition of love.

This week, as I thought about the subject of love, my mind went back to my own experiences of love, experiences that have played a part in defining how I understand love. I replayed experiences from growing up in my family circle, I recalled some of my deep friendships, I thought back to some of my first girlfriends. My mind even drifted back to some of the songs I remember hearing, songs that spoke about the subject of love. There were a lot of conflicting messages in those songs.

Elvis Presley sang: *Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you.*

Def Leopard sang: *Love bites.*

Foreigner sang: *I want to know what love is, I want you to show me.*

Tina Turner sang: *What's love got to do with it?*

Chicago sang: *I don't want to live without your love, I don't want to face the night alone*

Haddaway sang: *What is love? Baby don't hurt me, don't hurt me no more.*

Alana Myles sang: *Love is what you want it to be.*

Think about that list for a moment...what is love? Is love something we fall into and out of? Is love the feeling I get when I get what I

want? Alana Myles would have us believe that “*Love is what you want it to be.*” Really? Is it?

**Illus:** When I was 16, I began a dating relationship that lasted for three years. We both had good families and we both loved Jesus, but we both had hurts and hang ups which made our dating relationship an exercise in pain. You’ve probably all heard the saying that “*hurt people, hurt people;*” this was certainly true in our case.

At the end of those three years, I can remember one particular conversation like it was yesterday. We were on the phone, talking together, and I was asking her a question about our relationship that she didn’t want to answer. Rather than give me an answer me, she hung up on me. I couldn’t believe it. I called her back and she answered and hung up again. I was so angry that I grabbed my keys, jumped into my 1982 Volkswagen Jetta and raced off to her house.

When I got there, I insisted that we finish the conversation she had ended so abruptly on the phone. She laughed in my face and walked away...I stood there for what felt like an eternity: humiliated, angry, and hurt. When the cobwebs cleared, I yelled: “*It’s over,*” and I stormed out of her house. Like I said before, *hurt people hurt people.* And somewhere between her front door and the return home, I made a vow to myself that crippled me for the next decade: “*I will never let anyone hurt me like that again.*” And I didn’t.

I went to Bible school the following year and developed friendships that continue to this day. When I graduated, I began to pastor a church in Calgary, met my future wife 6 months later, and was married 13 months after that; after a few more years, along came our son.

But the cracks began to show in my life. I regularly kept people at a safe distance. I would let them in, but only so far. And while this may be wise when it comes to strangers, it spells death in deep friendships, or in marriage. Fear and love are like oil and water: they do not mix well. I had redefined what love was according to my broken experience of it. My fear of pain, humiliation, and rejection kept me living in the shadowlands of love.

But God broke in one day. He brought to mind the vow I had made years before. I needed to repent, I needed to renounce the words I'd spoken. That's exactly what I did. Now things didn't change over night; they rarely do. Resetting long-established patterns of thinking, acting, and relating all take time. But God continues to set me free to receive love from Him and others, and to give love to Him and others.

When it comes to the subject of love, all of us have some firsthand knowledge. And this is precisely why it is such a dangerous subject. All too often, we experience such brokenness in relationships, and yet we make our experience the measuring stick or definition of love.

Some of you have had spouses walk out on you. I know some of you high school students have experienced being dumped, almost overnight, by your friendship group. Some of you were abandoned by parents, or maybe they didn't physically leave but ignored you altogether. Some of you are estranged from your siblings or kids...and it's worse than a death because you're mourning the loss of a person who is still alive.

My dear people, we are being naive if we think that these broken experiences don't affect the way we give and receive love. But like

Andrea said last week, we don't have to be ashamed about the place we find ourselves in, because Jesus isn't. Jesus isn't ashamed of you, **or** of your broken experience of love.

**Illus:** A week ago week, I was watching one of the CBC broadcasts of the Canucks game. Like many of you, in between periods, I was trying to recover from the multiple heart attacks the Canucks gave me. I might need to install one of those portable defibrillators in our home. Usually the intermission is a good time to re-fill your drink, or freshen the chip bowl, but as Ron Maclean was heading into a commercial break he said something worth writing down. "*In love, life, and hockey, you always play hurt.*" And hurt people always hurt people.

I said earlier that my fear of pain, humiliation, and rejection kept me living in the shadowlands of love...with people at an arm's distance. **But God** broke in one day. **But God...**these have got to be two of the very best words in the English language: **But God.**

I am broken, but God is making me whole.

I feel alone, but God walks along side.

I am disappointed, but God gives me hope.

I am lost, or sick, or proud, or filled with fear, **but God...**

Before we go any further this morning, let's stop and pray. Like Andrea said last week, feeling desperate can be good...it means we've run out of options to make life and love work on our own. The reason we pray is because of the **But God** factor. If you've had a broken experience of love, be it large and destructive, or small and

seemingly inconsequential, lets take a moment to bring our brokenness to Jesus and invite Him to enter into it this morning.

### Pray

As I continue to talk about the nature of love, the conversation needs to centre around God. Why centre around Him? Because, as 1 John 4:16 tells us, “*God **is** love.*” Rather than define love according to our broken experiences, the One who **is** love can act as our measuring stick.

The Bible teaches that God invites us into an experience of love that has been going on since before the creation of the universe. Two weeks ago, Dan reminded us that from eternity past, God Himself **is** relationship. You’ll never find the word *Trinity* in the Scriptures, and yet this is the term theologians have used to describe the essential nature of God. The Scriptures describe God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is both three and yet one.

From eternity past the Father has delighted in the Son and entrusted all things to His care, and the Son has loved the Father and joyfully embraced and engaged in all of the Father’s brilliant plans (like creation and redemption), and there too was the Holy Spirit, loved by the Father and the Son, joining in the delight of the Father for the Son and in the Son’s delight for the Father, and coming to dwell among us and within us as God’s personal, empowering Presence. God **is** love.

In John 17, Jesus prayed for all who would one day follow Him, “*May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent me and that **You love them as much as you love me.***”<sup>1</sup>

That’s quite a statement isn’t it? Do you believe it? So many of us struggle in life, with God and with others, because we don’t really believe what Jesus says right here. Our fear, our worries, our desire to control, to manage, and manipulate the things around us...would any of these be present if we believed the Father loved us as much as He loved His Son Jesus?

This morning I want to talk about one particular quality of God’s love, namely, that it’s persevering. I don’t think it’s possible to overestimate how important this quality is when it comes to our relationship with God, or with one another.

God’s love is tough...not in the sense of tough love, a no-nonsense-love that sets us straight and speaks the truth...while this is true of God’s love, I want to focus your attention elsewhere. The love of God is tough in the sense that it is resilient, persistent, tenacious, unflagging, untiring and indefatigable, it’s persevering, it’s relentless. We might say that God’s love has thick-skin, but a soft heart.

Without even thinking, we tend to assume about God what we’ve experienced in other relationships. Many of us have experienced love as a game that is won or lost based on our performance. If you perform well in a relationship, you win, and love is your prize. If you perform poorly, according to the expectations of the one you love, you lose, and the relationship ends or spirals downwards.

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:23, New Living Translation.

God's love is thick-skinned, it's persistent, it perseveres. And God's love is 100% gift. Our performance, or lack of performance, doesn't even enter the conversation. God doesn't love because He has to. God doesn't love because He should. And He doesn't love when He feels like it. God **is** love. He loves because it is His nature to love. Like water is wet and the snow is cold, like Spring follows Winter, and constant rain on the North Shore, God **is** love...He just is.

And with God, love goes beyond a feeling to an ongoing act of His will. God's love leads Him to make all kinds of promises to us in the Scriptures: to be faithful, to forgive, to walk with us, to protect, to bless, to lead, and to transform. God's love isn't all talk; His love leads to action.

In 1 Kings 8:23, King Solomon says, "*LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. 24 You have kept your promise*".

Exodus 34:6-7 says, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*"

Romans 8:39 tells us that "*nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" 1 Corinthians 13:8 tells us that "*love never fails.*" God's love never fails.

Again, with God, neither our sin, nor our failure, is fatal because His love has nothing to do with our performance, it has to do with His nature. His love never runs dry, never grows weary, it never gives up.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, He agonized as He thought about the death awaiting Him. He said to His disciples, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death...39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*<sup>2</sup>

Matthew tells us that Jesus "*went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."* And a little later, Jesus asked the Father one last time to be spared from the cross.

There's comes a point where love needs to go beyond feeling to action. To use the language of our day, when it came to the cross, *Jesus wasn't feeling it...* part of Him wanted out. But then, real love is so much more than something we feel, isn't it? Sometimes love is a decision, a commitment, an act of the will.

It was an act of love that led Jesus to the cross, that is, it was a decision, a commitment, an act of His will. The greatest acts of love are rarely ones filled with romance or emotional sentiment; this was certainly the case as Jesus chose the cross and laid down His life for our sake.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:38-39, 42, 44; New International Version.

God **is** love. His love doesn't waffle or waver, it doesn't go up and down depending on His emotions, His love isn't tied to our performance; His love doesn't fail.

If only this were true of all our other relationships. If you will indulge me for a few minutes, I'd like to make a few observations about what passes for "love" these days. Is it just me, or has the world around us gone mad? Even the Christian understanding of "love" has been commandeered, redefined, and repackaged.

Some people talk about love as though it were an irresistible, alien force; love is something that happens to us. People regularly talk about falling into and out of love. Is love something we fall into and out of? To me, that sounds less like love and more like trying to get into and out of a canoe.

I've sat across the table from married men and married women and heard things like: *But I've fallen in love with someone else...I wasn't looking for love, it found me. I can't help what I feel, can I? How these feelings I have be wrong?* Are you kidding me? How can our feelings be wrong? How many times have you felt like strangling your boss, or the driver in front of you, or your kids, or, if you're a student, your parents? Few of us act out on half of what we feel; our feelings regularly mislead us.

Love is seldom spoken of any more as being a commitment, a decision, an act of the will; "love" has been relegated to the realm of emotions. We've believed the lie that "love" is primarily something that we feel. And because our feelings come and go, relationships seem to come and go at the same alarming rate.

All over the world people are talking about the wedding of Prince William and his beloved Kate; already it's been dubbed the wedding of the century. When it comes to "love," we are captivated by beauty and romance, or at least the idea of beauty and romance. We all love fairy-tales endings: *"and they all lived happily ever after."* But too often we take this to mean that for the next 50 years they will feel for each other the same intense feelings that they felt in that first moment...there is a reason we call these stories "fairy tales".

Feelings only gets us so far...every friend, every spouse, every parent can tell you that much. A marriage is made up of many moments, most them much less romantic and beautiful than the wedding day. A parent-child relationship is made up of many moments that range from joy to frustration. A friendship is made up of many moments, gifts given and kindnesses extended, but there are also broken promises and unkind words. When feelings change, has "love" left the building?

I suppose it depends on how one defines "love". I've been re-reading a C.S. Lewis book the last few weeks and he said that people get the idea from books or movies that feelings of love will go on forever. And when we find that they do not, we assume that we've made a mistake...we're in relationship with the wrong friend, the wrong spouse, or the wrong kids, and surely our "mistake" entitles us to a change. When people "move on" in relationships, sooner or later they

realize that “the glamour will presently go out of the new love [**the new friend, the family**] just as it went out of the old one.”<sup>3</sup>

In our western culture, we love the idea of “love” so much more than the actual business of it. The reason is simple: real love costs us too much, it’s too messy, too painful...real love perseveres.

If you have your Bibles, I want to invite you to turn with me to 1 John 3; we need to hear these words in our own day and time. I’ll be reading vs. 11, 16, and 18. “[**11**]*This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another...* [**16**]*this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers...* [**18**]*Dear children, let us love not with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*”

As Christians, when we talk about what loving relationships look like, we always begin with God. We do this for two reasons: (1) so that we don’t make our broken experiences of relationship the standard or the norm. In looking to God, we learn to understand relationships in light of the way He relates to us; and (2) we look to God so that He can fill us with His love, His presence and power because we will never love like He does apart from Him.

Consider Jesus: the Father’s love was the foundation stone in His life. Remember the words the Father spoke at Jesus’ baptism: *This is my Son, whom I love, with Him I am well pleased.* We all long to be loved: to be known, respected, cherished, listened to, supported, and valued. There is nothing wrong with these desires; they are God-given. But only God can satisfy these desires. Your spouse can’t.

Your parents can’t. Your friends can’t. Your children can’t.

We’ll never be free to give and receive love apart from an ever-deepening understanding and experience of the Father’s love. His love is the one constant in a constantly changing universe. We can stake our lives upon Him and His love, and that’s exactly what Jesus did. When we drink deeply of His love, we have something to give away. A growing experience of the Father’s love, enables us to love others whether we feel like it or not, whether our love is appreciated or not, whether it is returned or not.

There is something noticeably absent from the apostle John’s description of Jesus’ love for us, and our love for one another. There’s no mention of feelings. That’s not to say that our feelings are unimportant, but just that love is more than a feeling, love is more than words, love is an action word...love is a verb.

**Objections/Questions:** before I finish this morning, I want to address a few potential questions or objections.

**(1) First,** *if love has a persevering quality to it, then what about our broken friendships, marriages, and families?*

In life, and in love, everyone of us plays hurt. More than anyone, God knows how deep our brokenness runs. That’s why He’s at work in us, around us, and through us to restore and heal relationships. Nothing is impossible for God where two people, or parties, are willing. But sometimes both parties aren’t willing...God knows that

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 97.

too. Romans 12:18 says, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*”

Love does have a persevering and preserving quality about it, but there are times when persevering love can no longer preserve a relationship. Some of you have been in abusive relationships, and you know what I’m talking about. God sees, He knows, He understands.

**(2) Second**, *does this persevering quality of love mean that I’m stuck with putting up and shutting up in a dysfunctional relationship?* The simple answer is “no”. Persevering in love doesn’t preclude speaking the truth. In a few weeks time we’re going to talk about speaking the truth, in love. Next week we’re going to talk about forgiveness. And in between these two lies a vast, uncharted territory for many of us.

**(3) Finally**, *isn’t it inauthentic to “act” in love when my feelings are clearly contrary? Shouldn’t I be true to myself?* As I said earlier, most of us are already doing this; we do not act out on of half of what we feel; if we did it would destroy us and others.

But to answer the objection, the Christian message is that we are ultimately most true to ourselves, when we are most true to God’s self. We’ve been made in His image and likeness. And our true self, the self that God is remaking/transforming, is one that looks, and acts, like Him. Our true self is the person God is making us to be. And so we don’t ignore our feelings, but we don’t let them rule us either. Since God is the One who rules our lives, we submit every thought, word, act, and feeling to Him.

**Conclusion:** I want to conclude with a few final words.

All too often, we experience the brokenness of love, and we make our experience the measuring stick going forward. Let me encourage you to lay down your broken experience before Jesus, the One who **is** love.

Don’t forget about the “But God” factor...you may be broken **but God** can make you whole, you may feel alone **but God** does walk along side you.

Where every other love has failed you and me in some measure, God’s love never fails and never gives up. He is for you.

Maybe you’ve never hear this truth before, or maybe until this moment, you’ve never been able to believe it. Jesus came from heaven to earth to blaze a trail back to the Father. Jesus laid down His life, He took our brokenness/rebellion/sin into Himself and died so that we could be free. As Dave Sattler is fond of saying, *there is no life, and love, apart from the One who gives it.* But in Him, there is life, and love, and forgiveness, and freedom.

And so this morning, whether it’s for the first time, or the thousandth time, come to Him.

### Worship