

**Love in a World on Fire: The Gift**  
Scriptures: Rom 6:15-23, Mark 8:1-9

Good morning! It is great to be together to worship this morning! One of the best choices I made in college—I made some bad choices, but that is for a different sermon—one of the best decisions I made was to be an usher at the school auditorium. I didn't get paid, but I got to go to all the events they held—concerts, comics, lectures, plays. It was great! I saw Frank Zappa, Dizzy Gillespie, Stokely Carmichael, and so many more. It didn't cost me anything, I just had to get there a little early and show people to their seats! I just wish I'd learned about it before my senior year! One night James Taylor was playing. The auditorium was packed. He had an all-star band with him. The room roared when they took the stage. Just as things quieted down some girls yelled out "We love you James!" Taylor responded, "I feel very warmly towards you as well!" Love means lots of different things, doesn't it?

This summer we have been looking at Love in a world on fire—how do we live out Jesus' call to love in our world today. One thing we've learned is that love—real love, the love Jesus calls us to --is about action. It isn't just warm feelings like James had or whatever kind of feelings the girls were expressing. Love calls us to ACT. Love Does, as Bob Goff put it. Love means that we put ourselves out for the benefit of someone else. That's not just for those people who we like to be with, or who make us feel good. We are also called to love those who make us uncomfortable or who we have to go find. The overlooked poor, the people on the margins, the people left behind. Jesus the good shepherd reminds us of the profound worth of every single person. Our world, our country, and even our city needs more love and less hate and apathy right now. Everywhere we look we see division and anger—name calling amongst our leaders, neighbor against neighbor, even division within our families. It is easy to feel completely overwhelmed by the need all around us. It's tempting to just throw up your hands and quit. How can we actually live out this call to love in our broken world? As we end this series that is the practical question we are tackling. How do we get the energy, the strength, the capacity to love?

We can't do it on our own. Trying harder and harder to do it by ourselves just leads us to exhaustion and cynicism and despair. To love others we need more than we have. We need an outside source of strength. We need the gift Jesus offers each of us—a gift of life and power and purpose. We can't live out that love command by gritting our teeth and trying harder. Our own striving will never get there—no, we need *Jesus' power* working in us. It is God's Spirit acting in us that allows us to live out this commandment to love. Being Jesus' hands and feet in the world is not just a metaphor, we are literally his body at work in the world, that is what it means to be the church. So how do we connect to the source that enables us to love like Jesus?

Our readings today show us. First Paul shows us how to get that supernatural strength to love others working in us—what the Bible calls the gift of eternal life in Jesus. Then our gospel reading shows us what that life of love looks like. In our first reading Paul contrasts two different ways to live. One connects us with the gift of life in Jesus that enables us to love extravagantly. The other way to live separates us from it. One way leads to life and love, the other leads to death. We are faced with two paths. Which way we go makes all the difference. The only way to live out the love command is by accepting the gift of life from Jesus.

The way of death is what the Bible calls sin. It is literally a dead end. Sin is a churchy word, but think of it like a knife. Sin cuts you off from everything that gives you life and meaning and hope. If you are a branch on a tree, being cut off from the tree is worst thing that can happen to you. That is what sin does to us, it cuts us off from God, who is the source of life and of love. We tend to think about sin as something that is fun or interesting or alluring but that we shouldn't do, because we tell ourselves that God is some kind of cosmic kill-joy. Who am I hurting by getting drunk again or watching some pornography or being a jerk to strangers? That picture of sin-- as something that we'd *like* to do but are bullied into not doing-- is mistaken. It is a lie from the Enemy. Sin isn't a withheld indulgence, it is a poison that enslaves us and eats away at who we are. It kills us.

Paul sums it up in verse 23, the last verse we read. It is a famous verse, and that can make it hard for us to hear what he's saying. The Message puts it like this: "Work hard for sin your whole life, and your pension is death. But God's gift is *real* life, eternal life, delivered by

Jesus, our Master.” Do you see the parallels? The Wages of Sin is Death. The Gift of God is Life. One path leads to death and nothingness. One path leads to life and fullness and love.

Our actions have consequences. We see that played out in our lives, and across the news don't we? What we do sends ripples out. Even small actions impact others. Frederick Buechner says that the power of sin is centrifugal. It tends to push everything out to the edges—everything goes flying off in bits and pieces until eventually nothing at all is left. Sin naturally separates us. It separates us from God, it separates us from each other, and it ultimately destroys us.

The “wages of sin” is almost a cliché because it is so familiar. Think of it this way: it is not a punishment; it is the natural consequence. Each self-centered act at the expense of others, every refusal to live charitably, every act of pointless lust or greed ultimately tears us apart. The way of sin is not a lifestyle, it is a deathstyle. It separates us from the source of life, from God. It breaks up our healthy relationships with others. Sin leads us –alone and sad and cold –to the ultimate separation of the grave.

The contrast with the LIFEstyle that God offers could not be bigger. Sin pays in consequences, but God GIVES free gifts. God steps in and breaks the chain of consequences and frees us from slavery to sin. God offers us the free gift of life in Jesus. This is a gift—that means it is not something you earn. It is not something you deserve. It is a gift. God gives it because he loves you. Because it pleases him to do it. The gift is a reflection of what God is like, not what you have earned.

What is the gift? It is eternal life! Sin pays back with death, but God extravagantly gives us eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Instead of ultimate separation and death, we have ultimate life *in* Jesus, which empowers us to love others like Jesus does.

We often misunderstand eternal life. People think it is just a wish for the future—maybe someday, after we die, something good will happen. And we aren't even sure if it is good news! We worry that it will be an eternity of boredom! But that is not what God offers us at all! Eternal life is not a far away promise, it is right here. Right now. When we follow Jesus, our new life in Christ starts today! It connects us to God's power for our lives that helps us to live out the command to love. We can stop trying to manage everything on our own and start

letting Jesus live through us. We stop struggling to do it all and start letting God work in us. We stop pushing for our own way and start walking alongside Jesus.

This new life in Jesus doesn't just make us a different kind of slave, it frees us. We experience true freedom, living the lives we were created for. We can start living that real, full, eternal life right now. God launched his new creation on Easter morning with Jesus' resurrection, and he is ready to begin shaping our new lives right now! Friends—I hope you won't turn away from the free gift of real life. Accept that gift to live and love extravagantly. Leave the way of sin and death behind.

Let's see how this new life empowers us to love like Jesus. That is what our gospel reading shows us. It is the story of the feeding of the 4,000, one of two stories of big crowds getting fed. Mark and Matthew each report both stories. One is feeding the people of Israel, the second, this one, is feeding the Gentiles, the rest of the world. Between the two Jesus provides for everybody!

In each story we see God's love for us, his amazing capacity to provide beyond our wildest dreams, and the disciples' slowness recognizing what God was doing through Jesus. But despite the disciples being dense—in both stories Jesus chooses to use *them* to get the people fed! If Jesus can use these not so bright disciples, he can use us despite our failings and foolishness! Trust him.

This event happened in the desert wilderness across the Sea of Galilee, where the Gentiles lived. But there Jesus was—teaching and healing people. In fact, he was attracting big crowds among these Gentiles. The crowd had been with him three days and was hungry. There wasn't a Chic-Fil-A or a neighborhood Costco in the area—this was the wilderness and there weren't even towns nearby. It says that Jesus had *compassion* for the people. He cared about these people. He taught them, he healed them, and now he is worried about them going hungry! God cares about ALL parts of your life! There is nothing that is off limits to talk to God about or to go and ask for help about. Jesus is right with us in the middle of all of it.

Jesus is driven by compassion for *Gentiles*! His love isn't limited to just one people group, he is stretching his Jewish disciples' understanding to recognize that he has come to save ALL people. God gives everyone, even the Gentiles, an overwhelming feast. Jesus takes seven

loaves and a few fish and feeds thousands of hungry people. And there are baskets and baskets of leftovers!

One of the recurrent pictures in the Bible is of the great wedding feast in the Kingdom of God. The end of the Bible story is not an endless church service, it is a great party! A celebration with the best of everything! This feeding story is a little hint of what God's generosity is like.

As we start to open up God's gift of new life to us, we are like the disciples in this story. We see Jesus' compassion for the outsiders. And we are called to care for them too. Then he shows us the amazing capacity of God to create abundance out of scarcity. Do we have enough bread for this crowd? No way! What can we possibly do? The only answer is get in step with Jesus! Just as he did with feeding the 5000 people earlier, Jesus takes a bit of food and somehow there is more than enough for everyone.

This picture of God's abundance and provision is so important to keep in mind. Don't start with an accounting of how little we have or what our limitations are. Start with God's capacity and his faithfulness! How much food can we collect for Crossroads Urban Center? I don't know—but God knows and can multiply it! Who would have thought that we could have come into this year with a budget more than 10% higher than last year? Let alone that we would find ourselves here in the middle of the pandemic on track to meet that expanded mission? God provides! As we pray and listen and seek his will, God blesses our efforts to follow him. Don't tell God what he can't do! Ask him what WE CAN do for him!

Jesus could have fed the people in that crowd any way he wanted. He could have made them suddenly not hungry. He could have had food appear in front of each person, poof! But that isn't how he did it. He acted through the disciples. He chose to involve us in his compassion. First, he asked what was available—how much do you have? Not how much DON'T you have, but what do we have. He took the little they had and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples. Then he had the disciples take the food to the people. Everybody got all they wanted. Jesus chooses to use his disciples to get the job done! Who puts the food in each person's hands? The disciples do! We all have a role to play in God's kingdom. Jesus chooses to use you and me to show love to people right now! How can we live out God's call to

costly love for others? How can we respond to the overwhelming need we see? Invite Jesus into the situation. Give Jesus the resources you have, and then follow his lead. And prepare to be surprised!

Have you ever experienced God's surprising power and generosity like that? A few years ago our former church was packing food for people in Africa one day. We thought it would be just a small group and a modest amount of food. But instead we ended up with hundreds of people there and filling most of a SEMI trailer with food ready to ship to Africa! Amazing how God worked! And it wasn't a burden, it was such a joy filled day as we witnessed God's provision. What a blessing get to be part of getting food to hungry people! Or think about how many people we were able to provide clean water for through the Walk for Water? First Pres—that is what we are doing right now with the Golden Celery Challenge for Crossroads. That is what our youth were doing yesterday collecting food all across the avenues!

God's free gift is eternal life, starting now. Choose Jesus' lifestyle and he'll empower you to love and to serve and to live life to the full! Don't miss out. Jesus is waiting to move in you and in me so we can share his love all across this valley!

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—Save us! The way of sin and death often seems so attractive, even while it tears us apart. Help us to turn to you and accept your free gift of real, true life. Move in us and use us to feed your sheep and show your love to lost, the last, the least and the lonely. Bless us to be a blessing all along the Wasatch Front! Amen!