

TAKE A STEP

Love Serves

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 NIV

Keep company with Him (God) and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that. Ephesians 5:2 MSG

Love gives of itself, it's extravagant, it serves; it can't help itself!!!

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10 NIV

We are made in God's image, created in Christ Jesus. People growing in the likeness of Jesus. Our lives are fundamentally and tremendously transformed and impactful. We are richer and fuller as we express and give to the world who we are, who God, Love Himself, made us to be – a remarkable humble servant.

On Day 6 of Week 1 *Encountering God Through Serving*, we recognized that we are uniquely created individuals fashioned by God's hands, filled with His breath, gifted with His spirit to do His good work. It's really quite amazing that the Masterful Creator of all the Universe would involve us in His good work but He does!!! It's what we are made for and where our lives find meaning and purpose.

Serving is the pathway of expressing our God-given unique purpose. This beautiful work demonstrates God's heart in our world. It brings His kingdom down here in you!!!!!! And through you to your home, your circle of relationships and out into the world. Lived for God, your life has an endless ripple effect in the world and He so delights over your presence in His marvelous creation! You can shine His glory in a way that no other human ever has or ever will.

Think of the places where He has planted your feet in your home, your work, your church, your neighborhood, your community. What would the kingdom in all its glory, peace, joy and beauty look like there? See it and begin praying and participating in creating that picture. What would Love do?

Give a hug, say a prayer, make a meal, send notes, sit by the stranger, give a gift? Could Love be a listening ear, a helping hand, a random act of kindness, opening your home, teaching a skill, forgiving a deep hurt, mentoring a young man or woman, volunteering in a classroom, caring for the aging, the sick, giving your time, your strength, a resource? God knows you, and He knows the needs in those around you.

Knowing He loves you deeply, find a quiet place to sit with Him and honestly look together at your time and resources, how are you spending your days and energy? Will you let Him speak into your life and make adjustments if He so directs?

Watch the video for "Do Something" by Matthew West at <http://bit.ly/lent4d1>

*Through love **serve** one another. Galations 5:13b*

DAY ONE - MAR 12

Love Serves Through Our Ordinary

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

We are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around ... Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of His body. As a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? Since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good. Romans 12 excerpts MSG

What from this passage does your heart need to hear most? What aspect (s) of love and/or serving captured your attention? Underline it. Take note of it. Love is a verb. Did you notice all the action? What step might you take? How will you keep this in the front of your mind and in your heart to do today, this week, this month that you might develop a habit and grow in Godly character?

Dear Father, fill our ordinary lives at our very core, with Your extraordinary love-light that we'd live and serve out of a love that points others to You.

DAY TWO - MAR 13

Love Serves in the Mess

Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

John 11:43-44

Many of us have heard this story since we were little, feeling the sadness of Jesus weeping with His friends and encouraged by His attentive care and comfort of two sisters whose brother has died. As children, we would wait to hear the best part all over again: "Lazarus, come out!" The story books pictured a man coming forth, mummy like, strips of grave clothes falling off as he moved toward the embrace of elated family and friends. Every movie has portrayed it a bit differently but there he is, Lazarus, alive and well. Rightfully awed, we applaud Jesus the Resurrection Life.

But often we've missed what Jesus said next, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Jesus turned to the crowd, Lazarus's community, family and friends who had gathered weeping and grieving over his death and He says to them, take off the grave clothes, the "stinky" grave clothes as Martha keenly points out, and let him go.

The Message translation says, "unwrap him and let him loose." And ESV "Unbind him, and let him go."

Jesus directs the community to free Lazarus from what kept him wrapped up in death even though he was alive. This is such a good picture of a loving community serving to set one free.

We are all too often blind to our own sin and brokenness; it has become so much a part of us that we think it actually is us. We remain bound up in lies that bring death and old patterns of thinking and behaving even though Jesus has set us free and empowers us to live a new life.

A loving community that's safe and transparent helps to prayerfully identify and patiently serve one another in peeling away that which smells of death, the old life, worldly ways, ways of sin and brokenness that have become so enmeshed in our hearts and minds crippling our walk with Jesus and others.

We learn to serve grace-filled towards each other as we listen to Jesus and care for each other. Lazarus the dead-man-come-to-life had to patiently wait for others to unwrap him as they learned how to do something they'd never done before. His healing and the careful unveiling of Jesus' inner work also teaches them.

In the safety of Christ-centered relationships, we are called to help each other peel away the lies of the enemy, shedding our old ways of thinking and patterns of living which lead to death.

We must remind and help one another walk in the life-giving truths of the Resurrection Life, trusting the great I AM, believing, embracing and living the truth of who He says He is and who He says we are. Will we believe and participate in the work of Jesus in one another to unveil the glory of God?

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2

DAY THREE - MAR 14

Love Serves Practically

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, "Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I'll handle the works department."

Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.

*Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?
James 2:14-20 MSG*

Faith without works is dead.

Jesus didn't only come teaching the Kingdom of God, instructing His followers, telling them what it would be like, explaining how it will work, painting a beautiful picture of God's heart and desire for His people, Jesus came demonstrating God's heart. Jesus showed us God's merciful love that feeds the hungry, heals the sick, invites and embraces the outcasts, rights wrongs, and forgives sin.

Jesus lived out what He taught in Matthew 23:11, "the greatest among you must be a servant." He was a person of action, doing good, laying down His life, bringing glory to His Father, displaying the Kingdom of God not only preaching it.

He invites us to follow Him into a Kingdom of action not merely a discussion of ideas, theories and theology but to participate in God's redemptive plan for mankind, to love our neighbor not only as ourselves but as He loved us, to serve as He served us, to imitate Him. We are royal stewards of Thy will be done that the world may see God's goodness, His kindness and love and be drawn to Him.

Love is a verb. It's a cheerful heart, willing hands and feet, a smile that acts for the benefit of another. Telling someone to be warmed and filled may be a kingdom desire but warming and feeding someone is what the kingdom looks like. We will be known by our expressions of love. For this reason, serving in practical ways is something we must plan for, make time for, and integrate into the fabric of our lives and our relationship with God.

- Do you know a person or family with needs that you might bless/ serve in some practical way, such as transportation, groceries, clothing, childcare, home/ car repair, or teaching a life skill?
- Is there a consistent space of need that you are meeting, a ministry where you are serving?

"Do all the good you can by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, in all the places you can, as long as ever you can." John Wesley

DAY FOUR - MAR 15

Love Serves in Weakness

“Praise be to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7), and asked three times for God to remove it. God instead offers grace that His power would be shown through Paul’s weakness. Paul accepted this infirmity, thanked God for it and even saw it as a gift, in order to display God’s greatness through His life. Because of the grace and comfort Paul received in His own weakness, he could then love and serve others who were hurting, weak, persecuted, and in the midst of their own struggle.

No one wishes for pain and struggle. As a matter of fact, we do whatever we can to avoid it, numb it, or get rid of it. When trouble strikes, whether a physical ailment, a challenging life circumstance, relational struggle, or a financial strain, we plead with God for healing, for relief, for deliverance. Experiencing God’s “yes” to those pleas fills us with sweet happy joy. Our God is a God who heals, relieves, rescues, and delivers!

But our God is also a God who comforts. He meets us and stays with us in the midst of our suffering giving grace, strength, help and the comfort we need to endure. It is often in these places of suffering that our friendship with Him deepens and grows. We realize that we can trust Him to show up and carry us through what we thought would be impossible. Breath by breath we discover His great faithfulness and our utter dependency on His Presence. We learn to love Him more. Intimacy grows as does our confidence in Him.

In response to Paul’s request for healing, God didn’t remove the thorn but gives him grace to live with it saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

Paul also wrote the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

What if we saw the comfort and grace we receive as launching places to serve others? To take the love and comfort received in our own struggles. His friendship and intimacy, the peace He offers in the midst of hardship, and allow it to overflow into the lives of others hurting and suffering? Isn’t it just comforting to have the ear of someone you know understands because they’ve been there?

Did you know that there is a high correlation between feeling heard and feeling loved? Just being listened to and understood is a great gift that comforts and helps ones not feel isolated but rather cared for and connected... even if the problem remains.

“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.”

David W Augsburg

Has the Father of all comfort met you in a place of suffering? Might this be a place where you meet others with the unfailing love of Jesus? Could you give someone your time and attention, and let let them know that they’ve been heard?

DAY FIVE - MAR 16

Love Serves Generously

And now, brothers and sisters (speaking to the Corinthians) we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst, of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.
2 Corinthians 8:1-4

WAIT? WHAT?!! In severe trial, not after it was over or before it came, but in it, overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity? Those things don't go together, not in our economy, right? Severe trials put people in survivor mode. However, this fierce trial only revealed what was deep inside them. The grace of God moves the Macedonians (Gentile Christians), filling them with joy and generosity toward the Corinthians (Jewish Christians).

The extremely poor still believed their contribution would be valuable. They wanted to give. Perhaps they knew better than anyone else that every little bit helps. They urgently pleaded for the privilege of giving. Their poor hands didn't make a poor heart, their rich hearts made rich hands.

The gospel of Jesus had so transformed their hearts, that even in extreme poverty, they gave in ways that reflected God's heart. Their faith-filled giving exceeded any expectations and explanations.

The generosity of the Gentile Christians toward the Jewish Christians was doing more than meeting a physical need. It was building a bridge, paving a path of peace between peoples once at odds in faith, but now unified in Jesus, one people.

The Macedonian church demonstrate the fine print on our own money, in God we trust. What if we gave our money and ourselves in such a way that lived that declaration ... in God we trust?!

God gave His only Son that we would have life. He generously held back nothing. He's 100% serious about loving you. The cross makes that abundantly clear. And Jesus who was rich in glory and power being the exact image of God, laid aside His glory. He became poor, a servant, giving His life for us that we could be rich.

Children of God will find it in their hearts, in the very DNA of the Spirit living in them, to give BIG because God is a generous Giver.

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. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

1 John 3:16-18

DAY SIX - MAR 17

Love Matters Most

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Nothing! WOW!! It's quite amazing and convicting that we could accomplish such spectacular feats yet be nothing and gain nothing. It's concerning, isn't it? Profound yet simple. Love counts! It makes all the difference. Just make sure you love.

But this love, agape love, is the kind of love Jesus has for His Father and followers. It is the love God has for mankind immeasurable and incomparable, selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. The source is God, Himself And, I sincerely want to be moved and motivated unselfishly, solely by the love of Jesus. Don't you? But honestly, my heart can be a mix of emotion and motive. Sometimes before I even realize it, my heart has become detached from abiding in God's love, my thoughts have detoured and I've become more concerned with self. Please tell me you've been there too.

We can start a conversation aligned in love, speak the right words, truth telling words, phrased carefully but then get suddenly sidetracked into making a point rather than staying focused in love for the best interest of another. We can be ignited from the love of Jesus at the center of us to meet a great need, wanting to give and love fully and then we struggle, serving or giving out of sense of duty, responsibility or obligation, maybe to be noticed, praised and affirmed rather than out of real love?

How often I need to stop and confess, realigning my self-focused heart to be shaped and filled with God's love as well as great gratitude for the invitation or opportunity to participate in His work, for the energy, capability and privilege to serve or give ... so often ... so often!

How does love serve? Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Lord Jesus, we confess our deeds done apart from Your love, a bankrupt self, an empty way of living, achieving and gaining nothing. Give us pure hearts filled with Your love to serve and give and reach out to others from the immeasurable, self-less love we have received. Let all that we do be done in love. Thank You that Your love never fails, that it is limitless and enduring to all generations. Let not what You've given us pass through our lives absent of the love with which You gave it.

"Do small things with great love." – Mother Teresa