



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# The Labor That Grows Out of Love: Follow the Dots

SCRIPTURE:  
1 Thessalonians  
1:2-3  
1 Corinthians 13:1-8

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November 14, 2021 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**L**ove is what makes life human and also holy. Our lives are defined by love. We accomplish things. And our accomplishments matter. We build things and contribute to the world. We move the needle and in our own small ways, we change things, we hope for the better. All of that is important. But at the end of the day—and at the end of our days—the thing that matters most is love. Our lives are defined by who we love and how we love.

Theologian James K. A. Smith says that worship is the practice that curates our hearts to love the right things and to love in the right ways. We are what we love.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of loving, however, can be an overwhelming, all-consuming venture. This is the stuff of poets and songwriters. It fills the plotlines of novels and screenplays. It's also Biblical. Song of Solomon, a book of the bible that is not often read in worship, speaks of love just this way.

*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;  
For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth  
The time of singing has come  
Let me see your face  
Let me hear your voice  
For your voice is sweet.*

When we experience love, like the Song of Solomon declares, it can be overpowering. Literally, we can feel powerless. Our heart is on our sleeve. Our thoughts are consumed. The smallest gesture or facial expression can turn our insides to jelly. Love can leave us completely out of control. The Song of Solomon gets that.

Paul, on the other hand, well, let's just say no one

has accused him of being a romantic. But when Paul speaks of love, he says that love is work. I thank God for your labor of love. Of course, you know what he means by that. Love, for Paul, is not limited to our feelings. He is talking about how we treat one another. Do you remember what we said last week? (That's a rhetorical question; I really don't want a show of hands). Last week we said that faith is work because faith is not just something we think; it shows up in our choices. If I understand the text, Paul says love functions the same way. Love is not limited to what we feel; love shows up in our choices.

Paul's most detailed text about love is 1 Corinthians. He says: Love is patient, love is kind, love is not arrogant or rude. He's not describing feelings. He's talking about the way we treat each other.

Patience sounds like a feeling, but it's really a choice. The irony is that when we choose patience, what we are likely feeling is impatience. But love tries to rise above that feeling and chooses to act with patience. It's work.

Love is kind. That's not something we feel; it is how we act. And often our kindness is displayed in the face of a lack of kindness. Like faith, love shows up in our choices, and that is why it's a labor. As Clint Black sang, love isn't some place that we fall, it's something that we *do*.

John Meacham wrote a biography of John Lewis, and in it, Lewis describes this work of love. Lewis says, "It's not love of one individual for another. Not loving something that is lovely to you. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us... Even those we might call our enemy."<sup>2</sup> That's work.

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1 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (2016) p. xii.

2 John Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On* (2020) p. 62-63.

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And that is not a love we develop on our own; it is a gift from God. That is why Paul thanks not the Thessalonians, but thanks God for this love practiced in their lives. It is a gift, but it is also a labor because it endeavors to recognize the image of God in our neighbors, even when it is difficult to see.

But you know that. Paul doesn't know you, but I think were he to preach to us today, he would offer this same prayer: Village, I thank God for your labor of love.

One way this labor of love shows up is in our mission. Mission is bigger than service, for it is not simply offering a product. And it is bigger than charity, for charity is often about making the giver feel good. No, the mission of the church is, or should be, an act of love.

Today we give thanks to God for Signature Mission. Every year, you reach out and touch some mission in our community that changes lives. You stood with Rose Brooks domestic violence shelter, providing safety for women and children whose home life was defined by violence and fear. Fear is a terrible thing. You supported the Upper Room reading program, which provided after-school tutoring for children. When Reconciliation Services was imagining Thelma's Kitchen, you invested in a way that made that possible. That's just a few. This is what the labor of love looks like.

This year our Mission Committee was inspired by Kar Woo and the work he does with our homeless neighbors. He is moved by compassion for those in great need, and he sees the image of God in them, and we are partnering to support this ministry. For there is no theological justification for citizens in this country to live on the streets.

Visiting with Kar has made me aware that I have no idea what it is like to have no home. When I was in high school, I got a job selling shoes in the mall near my house. I was terrible at that job. After a few months, they transferred me to another store about 30 minutes away. One day after work, I was driving home on 285—the perimeter around Atlanta. It was a bit rainy and the roads were wet and I was driving too fast for those conditions. That was really stupid. When the cars ahead of me locked up, I couldn't stop. I watched, in slow motion, as I slid into the car ahead of me. I totaled the car.

But then, I called my mom. She came and picked me up. I even got another car... a used Ford Granada with about a billion miles on it. Driving that Granada increased my prayer life, I can tell you that. I never knew if it was going to start or not.

But here's the point. On a rainy afternoon in November, I did something stupid and found myself in a situation that I could not repair. I had a job, but I didn't have the money to address the circumstance I had created. But I had a family that did have those resources. I had a safety net. Most of us have that safety net; many of us have been that safety net.

But for so many people, when they hit a situation of bad luck, or maybe as a consequence of stupid choices, they find themselves in a situation that they can't fix—and there is no safety net. And they end up on the street. For many, there are mental-health or addiction factors and they are not going to make it without a net. Kar Woo saw that reality and sought to be the change he saw the world needed.

I told you recently about meeting Gabriel. He lived in the park across the street from the church I served in Florida. Gabriel loved the music of John Rutter and had gone to college. But when his mother got sick, the money used for tuition had to be spent on doctors. In time, the money ran out and Gabriel ended up living in the park across the street. We never know what spiral has led to someone finding themselves without a home to go to.

Because we love, it means it is holy to treat our neighbor like they are human and to minister to those on the street is a holy work. There is no theological justification for citizens of this nation to live on the streets.

But our mission is more than service, for we are not simply offering a product. And our mission is more than charity. It is, or should be, a labor of love. For mission to be a labor of love it has to be *relational*. This points to the growing edge in our mission. It is good and right that we share our financial resources; my goodness, it's more important for us to do the giving than it is for those who receive.

Our mission is most truly an labor of love when we learn some names and hear some stories and give some time to those who need us. And then we might grow ourselves.

I went with a number of you to Thwake, Kenya a

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few years ago. I met Rachel there. She's a nurse and a member of the church. And she's an amazing cook. Rachel was among the women who got up before the sun to heat water so that we might have warm showers. She then joined them in the cook house to prepare our breakfast over an open fire. She joined us at the health clinic to serve as a nurse all day long and then returned to the cook house to prepare the evening meal, which was a feast every day.

I said, "Rachel, you are taking such good care of us. You are working so hard." She said, "Pastor Tom, that is how we treat family." Rachel understands

Paul's teaching and knows the labor that is generated by love.

You do, too. As a community, we share financial support with mission partners around the city. But we also share time. We learn names. We hear stories. That's a labor of love.

It's in the church's DNA and it is work. For this labor is not love of one individual for another. Not loving something that is lovely to you. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us. And the love that will redeem a broken world. Jesus bet his life that it would do just that.