

**Vision Sunday: Live a Life of Love
Celebrating God's Work over the Past Five Years**

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Celebration of the Love of God

When you came in this morning you probably noticed that things were decorated for a celebration. And you're right!

This morning and next Sunday we are celebrating the ways we have been experiencing God pouring his love into our hearts, and through us into the hearts of others, over the past five years.

Romans 5.5 says:

We know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

Or, as another translation puts it:

His love has been poured out into our hearts

And we have been experiencing that in so many ways!

A regular refrain in scripture – you see it in a number of places in the psalms – is the call to gather the people of God together and tell about what God has been doing

Listen to Psalm 145

⁷ Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness;
they will sing with joy about your righteousness.

⁸ The LORD is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

⁹ The LORD is good to everyone.
He showers compassion on all his creation.

¹⁰ All of your works will thank you, LORD,
and your faithful followers will praise you.

¹¹ They will speak of the glory of your kingdom;
they will give examples of your power.

¹² They will tell about your mighty deeds
and about the majesty and glory of your reign.

That's exactly what we're going to be doing this Sunday and next.

This morning we'll look back and remember where this all began five years ago, and we'll have a chance to hear from three members of our church family as they describe how God has been leading them in learning to live a life of love in new ways.

Then next Sunday we'll come back together and have an open mic time of sharing and celebrating the ways we've been experiencing God's presence and work in our midst. And then after each of the services next Sunday we'll have a party in the Hub to celebrate what God has been doing.

Our Story

Let me take us back a few years – actually six years – to the start of 2019, when our Lead Team and our Elders entered into a year-long season of discernment, asking God to make clear how he was wanting to lead us in making our ministry efforts more faithful and effective over the coming years.

That year-long discernment process of listening and praying and discussing and reflecting by the session and the lead team culminated in a lead team retreat at the Mahseh Retreat Center up on Lake Bruce in November of 2019.



We came into that time with a sense that, as we looked across the landscape of our church, there were a number of different aspects of our ministry that were not quite where we wanted them to be – our sense of community and connection as a church, our group life, our mentoring and leadership development, our evangelism efforts, our impact in the community. It seemed like there was something that was lacking that God was wanting to do in each of those different areas, but we weren't sure what.

Then toward the end of our retreat, it felt to all of us as though God by his Spirit just began to bring some things together for us in unexpected ways.

Two key questions got raised, both of which God used to bring us to a place of real clarity.

First, Andrew asked: What is the thing we want to be known for most in the community?

When people encounter us in the grocery store, at the gym, in the lunch cafeteria, what would we want them to experience from us?

Our answer: Wouldn't it be our love?

Not first our political affiliations or our denominational connections or our theological distinctions or our moral convictions, but our warm welcome, our kind regard, our thoughtful questions, our acts of compassion – that is, the Love of God pouring through us to them.

In fact, isn't that just what Jesus says the world expects us to be known for?

John 13.34-35

Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.

Jesus calls us to live a life of love, and says our love should be the thing that proves to the world that we belong to him.

Second, a question Travis raised: If Covenant were suddenly removed from the community, would we be missed? If so, what would we be missed for? And what is the thing we would *want* most to be missed for?

Our answer: Again, wouldn't it be our love?

I Corinthians 13.1-3

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.

Paul says it really doesn't matter what how much we do or how impressive it all is if love isn't the thing that drives it all.

We talked about how there are many things that the church in our country has done to try to keep its place of power and relevance and legitimacy in the culture, but there really is only one thing that the church uniquely has to offer the surrounding world, and that is the love of God, lived out within a loving family called the church and poured out

upon the community around it. That's something you can't find at the local pub or the gym or the work place or anyplace else.

It seemed pretty clear to us that God was calling us to enter into an extended season of learning together, as Ephesians 5.2 puts it, how to

Live a life of love.

The Elders confirmed this as the direction God was leading us – that the work that he most desired to do in us and through us as a church for the foreseeable future is to make us a community of love.

None of this is to say there were not already many ways that God's love was finding expression between us in the church and through us out in the community. But we believed there was still lots of room for us to grow, and that that growth was what God was wanting to bring about in us.

So we reframed our statement of calling based on Ephesians 5.2 . . .

Live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love his people.

Pour out his love on the world.

. . . and five years ago today, on January 5, 2020, not having any idea that Covid was just around the corner, we introduced that vision to the church.

And at the end of that message, I held before the church a picture of what this could mean for us, and for the community in which we live.

Imagine with me, I said, what it would be like if God's love so defined us as a people, that . . .

when we come into an interaction with another person, they have a sense that they truly come first, that we put them ahead of ourselves

when we are with others, we become known for how well we ask questions and how attentively we listen, more concerned with hearing what is on their hearts than with telling what is on ours

when we finish a conversation with someone, even the most peripheral person: the person filling our order at the deli or dropping off the package at the door or waiting at our table, they feel they are valued, and worth acknowledging and pursuing

when we have interactions with people whose racial or ethnic or national background is different from our own, they feel us going out of our way to cross the lines of difference and move toward them

when we have conversations with people whose morals and beliefs are starkly different from our own, they feel our deep acceptance and not our judgment

when we come together, we think of church not as a place where we go but as a family we are glad to be part of and eager to spend time with

when we encounter friction or misunderstanding or hurt with one another, we work it out in healthy and gracious ways and go right on living and loving side by side

when people visit, the welcome they receive from each of us is so warm and welcoming . . . that our greeting ministry becomes redundant and maybe even unnecessary

when we encounter need in this world, we walk toward it instead of away from it, and we are generous and sacrificial in our response to it

and when people spend time with us, they can't help but ask, "What is it about you that makes you so different?"

As I look back over that list today, five years later, I am so moved because it seems to me that those things are exactly the things we have seen God bringing about in our midst as a church family.

So we wanted to take the time today and next Sunday to pause five years into this adventure of learning to live a life of love, and to return to God with our wonder and our praise and our thanksgiving for his work in our midst.

* * *

This is about him and his work, not about us and our work.

We have a wood-burning fireplace at home, which we love, and several times during our Christmas vacation I found myself settling in in front of our fireplace and just watching the fire.

And one time, I just watched the whole process carefully from the moment I lit the gas jets to when the fire was blazing.

First I laid the logs in place, careful to have good hardwood that had been sufficiently seasoned, and careful to arrange each log in just the right position – as close to the

flames as possible, but with just the right gap between the logs to allow the flames and air to flow between them.

Then I lit the gas fire starter and . . . nothing happened. At least not at first, not obviously. But then eventually smoke began to rise up between the logs, the first evidence of the effect of those flames underneath, and the smoke began to carry the fragrance of the fire up the chimney and out to the surrounding neighborhood . . . and just a whiff of it into the room as well.

Then flames suddenly began to dance in the smoke in these exuberant little bursts that lasted for just moments. At the same time you could begin to hear the crackling of the logs as the air pockets inside the wood snapped open in the growing heat.

Then, seemingly all at once, and everywhere across the logs, the smoke burst into flame, oranges and purples and blues and yellows, some tiny flickers, some huge flames, all interwoven, shooting up with exuberance, and so captivating and beautiful.

And this seems obvious to say, but it wasn't the logs that drew my eye. I didn't even look at them. They just laid there. In fact, pretty soon, the logs began to diminish, as they were consumed by the fire. But as they decreased, the fire only increased in its beauty as the flames rose up around them and between them.

What a picture of God's work by His Spirit in the midst of the church. Both Isaiah and John refer to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of fire (Isaiah 4.4, Matthew 3.11), and during Pentecost, when the Spirit descends on the church, He reveals his presence by a flame of fire (Acts 2.3-4). And over the past five years we've been experiencing the presence, the movement, the work, the transforming power of the Spirit of God in our midst.

Yes, there are ways we have sought to scoot the logs together and bring them within proximity of the flame. Over these five years, in response to what we have sensed has been God's leading, we've taken steps such as focused Sermon series, creating the Thrive experience, engaging in shared summer book reads, offering colony of heaven conversations, and connection dinners, creating the Purdue LINK role that we are actively seeking to fill, and more

But that's not our focus during this celebration – not on what we've done. Our focus is not on the logs but on the Spirit of fire and on the flames, on the ways we are sensing God has been moving among us, pouring out his love on us, and through us, and leading us more and more in living a life of love

I'm sure there are all kinds of examples that come to your mind.

Here are some of the evidences I see of the loving rule of God in our midst.

Some are more obvious ways we've been watching God work among us in our circumstances:

God bringing a wonderful swell of new folks into our midst, including a number who are in the first half of life, coming and jumping in and making Covenant home and adding to the beauty of who we are

God shaking things up through Covid and then leading us to reconfigure our children's ministry in a way that lets us to enjoy having our kids in worship with us for part of the time each Sunday

God bringing Daaron Fleegeer to us and growing our college ministry and our next gen ministry

God bringing more people to us who are exploring the faith or new to the faith in part because of the relationships of love we are forming with people in the community and because of the glimpses of him that they see in us

Raising up a faithful volunteer team of leaders who are shepherding the World Welcome community in a way that extends the hospitality of Christ to the world that arrives at our door

There is a lot that God has been doing circumstantially in our midst, and those are just a few examples.

But there has also been a profound interior work that God has been doing, ways God has been working within us, forming heart postures like

Humility, expectancy, relinquishment

Receptivity, openness, teachable hearts

Grace amid differences, generosity, a willingness to take risks, a deep regard of other

We see

deepening engagement with God in our worship life, coming before God with joy and expectancy and openness, growing in our first love, in our desire to be in the presence of the Lord together, at the foot of the throne, giving thanks and honor.

deepening connections with each other reflected by our lingering after services and our all-church gatherings as a church family,

increasing freedom and decreasing fear to simply love others in Jesus' name, not only within the church family but also out in the community,

intentionally building relationships with fellow students and coworkers and neighbors, showing love and living the sort of attractive lives that are drawing curious newcomers into our midst

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God is pouring out his love upon us, and he is transforming us. I'm sure you see it as much as I do.

And when we see God work in those way, we can't help but want to sing his praise, and bring him our gratitude, and tell one another what God has doing.

This morning we've asked three members of our church family to share how they have each been learning to live a life of love:

Grace Meng about loving Jesus
Naomi Cook about loving his people
and Roger Wiens about pouring out his love on the world.

And we'll be weaving their sharing through an extended season of worship and adoration, as we sing to God about our love for him, and glorify him in our midst.

God has poured his love into our hearts. Let's pour our hearts and our love back out to him.

Sharing

Next Sunday, we will continue our celebration

God has been doing such great things in our midst, pouring out his everlasting love on us.

And next Sunday during worship we'll have an opportunity as a whole church to share and to celebrate together.

Here's what we're going to do.

We want to encourage each of you to spend time this week reflecting. Talk about it around your table, or when your small group gathers

How have you been experiencing God pouring out his love on you as his follower and on us as a church family?

How has that found expression in your life or through your life, or in the life of your brothers and sisters in the Covenant family?

This morning, as you leave, each of you will receive a triangle, representing a part of Jesus's crown, expressive of his loving rule over our life together

We want you to take it home and write on it and then bring it back with you next Sunday

On one side, we'd like you to write a short phrase that begins with "God is". On the other side, write a short phrase that begins with "God has".

God is: what is something true about God's love that you have seen him put on display in our midst in the past five years?

And **God has:** how is that aspect of God's loving character finding expression in and through you or the people around you?

And then next Sunday, in place of a message, we'll be opening up the mic for an extended time of sharing, inviting the whole church family to share about who *God is* and what *God has done*.

We'll make time for a bunch of you to come up and share what's on your triangle in two or three sentences, and then once you've shared, you'll go over and clip your triangle onto this wonderful gratitude collage.

Let me give you a quick example:

On this triangle I wrote:

“God is abounding in love” and “God has been teaching us how to love with his love”

And then here is how would elaborate on that:

"*God is* abounding in love for us, and *God has* been using the relationships I have with the guys in my small groups over the past couple of years to teach us together what it means to have God be in the highest place in our lives, and to find our fulfillment and satisfaction in him alone. They show love his love to me and to each other by really pursuing each other's hearts, by asking great questions and listening really well to the answers, and by following those up with more great questions. They show me what God's pursuing love looks like."

Then after you've shared, you'll come over to this wonderful worship collage behind me and add your expression of praise.

Those of you who are joining us online today, we're so glad you're with us. We'll have more of these triangles and markers waiting for you next Sunday, and we'll give you a chance to fill them in when you're with us. Just be thinking ahead of time of what you'd like to write and share.

If you are a guest with us today, we hope you'll come back and join us. Even if you haven't been part of what God is doing here in this church, God has been showing you his love in your own life circumstances, and you are welcome to share the difference that has been making in your own life.

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We know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. Let this week be a week rich with praise and thanksgiving as together we celebrate God who has blessed us in such extraordinary ways.

And then next Sunday, be ready to come and tell what God has done, as we praise together the one who is the source of every blessing.