



BIBLE STUDIES
WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE



WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE: Bible Study series introduction

Take love out of Hollywood and you're left with not much. Take it out of Bollywood and you're left with even less. Take the quest for love out of social media or the daily dance of interpersonal interactions and the relational cupboard's pretty bare.

Love truly is central. A loveless life is painful beyond words. A life built on hate is really demonic.

'All you need is love (all together now) all you need is love.'

So sang the Beatles, and the world sang along. And still does in a way.

We naturally believe we can make love happen, as if it's in our hands to create love out of nothing. If only we could have the right atmosphere, or mental attitude. If only we set our wills to it.

If only ...

But no matter how much we sing about love or ratchet ourselves up to the task, we're not able to love, not simply, truly or fully. Not of ourselves, by ourselves.

Does that sound surprising? It might, because it contradicts all our natural thinking.

This series of Bible studies explores some big questions.

Perhaps they'll be pretty uncomfortable. Or maybe they'll revive and refresh us in the grace and truth we already know. Either way, sometimes big questions are the best ones to ask.

Unsurprisingly enough, we think we know what love is. We think we can find love, or that we can initiate it.

But what if we're actually in the dark about it, or at best in the shadows? What if we don't really know the first thing about love? Or what if our view of love is not even close to what true love is really like? Or if we've imagined God's love to be just like our love, except on a bigger scale?

What if God's love **isn't** like ours?

What if God's love has no earthly comparison? What if the love of God is so different, and so transformative, we need a new language to speak about it? What if God's plan for you were to be far greater than you imagined? What if his love was far deeper than you could dream?

This series of studies has been written to help you explore God's love. What could be simpler? What could be more dangerous?

Big idea for the series: Mission life flows out of who God is and who we are becoming.

Explanation of big idea: A missional life participates in the shared life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As a consequence we are transformed to be a community where God's love comes to life. The same love that transforms us is drawing our families, neighbours and friends into new life in Christ, thus we are compelled to include and invite all people to belong to God's family.

Purpose of series: To help people grow in their understanding and participation in the mission of God in the world.

Series Outline:

Over five weeks discover why a missional life is where love comes to life.

- *WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE* - Introduction to the series
- WHERE LOVE
- WHERE LOVE COMES
- WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE
- LOVE. LIFE COMMUNITIES

These bible study discussions require at least one hour together. This time could be extended if the group have other activities planned such as eating together before or after the study.

Leadership

Each bible study is designed to have a shared approach to leading. Someone needs to navigate the group through the three phases of the evening; Bible reading, reading of the introduction and group discussion. Therefore be sure to nominate someone to lead each week unless the group prefers to stick with one leader for the duration of the series.

The leader's role is to ask people to do the readings (Bible readings and introduction) and to read the discussion questions progressively during the discussion time allowing as many group members as possible to join in on the discussion.

Personal Preparation

The bible study discussion session will be more fruitful if each member has taken time to listen to the sermon and reflect privately on the bible study discussion questions prior to gathering with the group.

If you don't have time or for other reasons cannot join a small group to engage in these bible study discussions then consider doing them privately then spending time talking with someone remotely (phone, email, carrier pigeon) about your reflections.

Prayer

During this season spend extra time in prayer asking God to refresh your group and congregation in the Gospel. True renewal comes from seeing who we are in Christ, and mission flows naturally from a heart overwhelmed by the love of God.

Bible Study 1: WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE

Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

Open in prayer asking the Holy Spirit to guide your discussion together.

Introduction

When people fall in love, it's as if they come remarkably to life. Their eyes sparkle with special lights, their breath comes more urgently and they seem somehow to be straining forward to meet life. Love breathes life into the everyday ordinariness of our existence.

Actually, love changes people. The experience of being loved, at any stage of life, brings with it a kind of newness that brings out the best in us. We become more open to the gifts of life and the needs of others, and we live in a new way, a renewed way. Love brings life.

1. God is Love

Of course, we can hardly think about love or life without thinking of God. 1 John 4:16b tells us that, *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

In the very beginning God brought life to the world, reshaping the primeval chaos into a habitable planet (Genesis 1).

Then God breathed his own life into our human bodies and brought us to life (Genesis 2).

2. God is Life

God even entered human life at a depth which no-one could have anticipated, becoming a human being and filling our humanity with his own life.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood (John 1.14 Message).

This flesh-taking (incarnation) was not an interesting experiment but God's own project to rescue us from death and futility, and to renovate the whole world. In spite of our worst efforts, even when we killed him, God succeeded in bringing love back to life (John 1).

3. God is on Mission

To continue his work on earth, God created the church, whose task now is to celebrate love and life, and to be the vehicle for God's continued work of bringing love to life in the world. The church lives on the gifts of God – God's forgiveness, God's love, God's own life.

In its worship the church experiences the love of God in words and actions of forgiveness and of empowerment. Infused with the real presence of Jesus Christ, love comes decisively to life every time the people of God gather.

Life in the church is really a preparation and empowerment for a life of love in the world.

As we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, as we receive his body and blood, we become new people, with new potential for good, with new energy for a life of love wherever God gives us the opportunity.

Our families and our communities, our workplaces and our cultural settings might well experience through us something of God's love as it comes to life again in us. That's the plan. The life of a Christian is a life of faith active in love (Galatians 5), empowered by the love of Christ himself (1 Corinthians 13). Indeed, we have no other obligation, except to participate in this world transforming gift of God's love (Romans 13).

Conclusion

A missional life participates in the shared life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As a consequence we are transformed to be a community where Gods love comes to life. The same love that transforms us is drawing our families, neighbours and friends into new life in Christ, thus we are compelled to include and invite all people to belong to Gods family.

Group Discussion

1. Discuss the statement – *“Life in the church is really a preparation and empowerment for a life of love in the world.”* How does life in the church prepare you and empower you for a life of love? In what ways is this statement true for you?
2. How comfortable are you with what was presented in this sermon?
3. What impacted you or stood out for you? Why?
4. What questions were raised for you?

PRAYER

You mark us with your water, you scar us with your name, you brand us with your vision, and we ponder our baptism, your water, your name, your vision. While we ponder, we are otherwise branded. Our imagination is consumed by other brands, - winning with Nike, - pausing with Coca-Cola, - knowing and controlling with Microsoft. Re-brand us, transform our minds, renew our imagination. That we may be more fully who we are marked and hoped to be, we pray with candour and courage. Amen.¹

¹ Brueggemann, W. *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: The Prayers of Walter* (Augsburg Fortress, MN. 2003). P.524

Bible Study 2: WHERE LOVES COMES...

Reading: 1 John 4.7-21

Open in prayer

Introduction

We should know a lot about love. 'God is love', John tells us (1 John 4:8,16) and, after all, we've been made in his image (Genesis 1:26–28), so it's no surprise that love figures prominently in the whole human race. But the Bible also tells us that the image we were created in has been horribly twisted and distorted. We love the wrong things in the wrong way for the wrong reasons.

This may come as a surprise, but the opposite of love is not hate. It's selfishness. And selfishness marks our natural state. Self-centred thinking, living and acting: these are the expressions of human sinfulness. Martin Luther spoke about us as being 'curved in upon ourselves'. Like a supermassive black hole, we take all things into ourselves and let nothing out.

Self-centredness even hides itself as religion—just ask the Apostle Paul whose life as a Pharisee was consumed by zealous love for God and his Law (see Philippians 3:5). It conceals itself as true commitment—just ask Peter who really, truly believed that his love for Jesus was so great he would never forsake him even if the rest of disciples did (Matthew 26:34). It hides in the folds of sexual attraction—just ask David whose adultery led to bloodshed and death (2 Samuel 11:7-12).

Human sin hasn't left any part of life untouched. Not even love.

How might our natural selfishness express itself at home?

At work?

In the church?

Group Discussion

1. Look at the selfish love in **Luke 6:32–36; 14:12**. How does this compare to the love of God described in **1 John 4**?
2. Can you share in your own words what your experience has been of these two different kinds of love?—both love that is selfish and love that is described in 1 John.

And yet ...

Read again over that list of characters above: Paul, Peter, David.

Their failure in love, their wrongheaded expressions of love, didn't stop the love of God coming to them.

Our thinking about love is most naturally conditional: 'If you ... then I ...', or 'If I ... then you ought...'. We expect that our love will be rewarded, or at least returned. We can even transfer that sort of thinking onto our relationship with God:

'I've given so much ... therefore God ought to...'

'I've been a faithful member of the church for years ...that should be worth something ...'

And, conversely, we judge others according to our own standards:

'They haven't loved and cared for me ...they shouldn't be loved or honoured.'

In reality this sort of thinking is simply idolatry. It's the way all idol worshippers think their gods operate. The more you put in, the more you should get out. The greater devotion you show, the more your god should approve of you. The bigger the offering, the greater the blessing.

It's simply human self-centred love on a spiritual plane.

3. What particular parts of **1 John 4:7-21** counter this kind of thinking?

What other passages in the Bible can you think of that reinforce this difference?

4. Read the story of the workers in the vineyard in **Matthew 20:1-16**.

Why does this story grate with our sense of fairness?

Do we really want to get what we deserve in life? Why/why not?

Why do you think Jesus told this story to the disciples?

It's sometime said that the love of God is "unconditional". In using that term we've imported a psychological concept (it came originally from a particular school of humanistic psychotherapy) into the way we talk about God.

In fact, God's love is "counter conditional". He doesn't love us and let us be. His love, against all our selfish hatred of him, transforms us. He finds us, not as helpless victims nor as innocently lost sheep, but as rebels with weapons in our hands (see Colossians 1:22; Romans 5:10; 8:7-8; Ephesians 2:1-2).

But finding us in that state he loves us still, acting in his powerful and love to redeem us from our own rebellion.

In Jesus, God overcomes his own holy wrath, 'counter conditionally' loving us at the expense even of his only begotten Son.

5. What does **1 John 4:7-21** tell us about the nature of the love of God?

6. Read **Luke 15:11-32** read the story of the Father's amazing love.

What does this story tell us about our love?

What does this story tell us about God's love?

Where and how have you seen the love of God?

Could a person love God without knowing the forgiveness of their sins?

Why/Why not?

7. Try to express 1 John 4:7-21 in your own words. Or think about how you might explain this to someone who doesn't know the Bible.

PRAYER

O for a thousand tongues to sing our great redeemer's name; To sing beyond ourselves, extravagantly, with abandonment, beyond all our possibilities, and all our fears, and all our hopes ... to our redeemer dear, the antidote to our death, the salve to our wounds, the resolve of our destructiveness ... A thousand, a million, a trillion tongues, more than our own, more than our tradition, more than our theology, more than our understanding, tongues around us, tongues among us, tongues from our silenced parts. Tongues from us to you in freedom and in courage. Finally ceding our lives and our loves to your good care. Amen.²

² Brueggemann, W. *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: The Prayers of Walter* (Augsburg Fortress, MN. 2003). P.160

Bible Study 3... LOVE COMES TO ...

Reading Ephesians 2:1-6

Open in prayer

Introduction

This week's sermon raised the whole matter of personal transformation through the Gospel. Therefore this weeks study digs deeply into several biblical passages to enable us to discover how we are transformed by Gods love.

When the Beatles sang "all you need is love", they sang more than they knew, and certainly more than they could deliver.

But they're not alone.

How many plays, books, films, songs, paintings and poems have been produced on the theme of love?

And what do they have in common?

One thing: they expect love to transform you, even to transform the world.

When love comes, your world changes.

That's the message. And it's certainly the hope—the expectation if not the reality.

And, conversely, isn't our relational pain due to the dashed expectations of disappointing love? Where love dies, hope and faith also shrivel up.

The pain is there because we trust that love will *do* something. We believe it will overcome obstacles and solve problems. But it seems to fail so often. Marriages entered into with great expectations turn to ashes. Parents abandon their children. Children abandon their parents. Love is a battlefield.

Yet in it all there's an echo of our home. The glory of heaven hangs about us, even if we don't recognise it. Love, which is the currency of the kingdom of heaven, is still worth something in the kingdoms of this world. Even if we don't know what we're saying, or what love it is we need, we still believe "love is all you need". And so we sing along, hoping against hope it's all true.

The problem is we don't really know what love is. Even the best of human love isn't the love of God which always transforms us.

John says, 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but he loved us'.

The statement, 'not that we loved God', is the story of human sin. In fact, we loved everything **but** God. This is what Paul makes plain in **Romans 1:18–32**. Take time to read that now.

In what way is our love for other things actually the expression of our hatred of God?

Why do you think God does not want to share first place in our hearts with anything else?

Paul uses the word 'idols' to describe anything that comes between us and God. These are not just physical images. Luther put it this way in the *Large Catechism*. Commenting on the First Commandment, he says,

What is the force of this, and how is it to be understood? What does it mean to have a god? or, what is god?

Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress...whatever you set your heart and put your trust in is your god'.³

These are confronting words.

Our idols are the things (hopes, dreams, people, institutions, relationships, riches, spiritual status, abilities, etc) which we set our hearts on—and in which we trust.

Truly, these words leave none of us untouched. We are all idolaters.

Nothing we could do could change our nature in this regard. Only God's merciful action could redeem us from such a state. God's love is active and self-giving. He gave us everything when he gave us his Son.

God loved those who hated him. God loved us when we didn't trust him. He loves us still, even though our hearts are easily led astray from him.

'Not that we loved God' (statement of fact, the Law), 'but that he loved us' (statement of Truth, the Gospel). But John is not just saying that Jesus was given to the world in a general sense. It's not as though Christmas is all there is to the gospel story. The babe born in the manger was born to go to the cross. The love of God is fully known only through the cross. It's not only that the cross displays **how much** God loves us (he gave his Son), but in the cross, God has actually **done** something very significant. It's an active work—God reconciling the world to himself through bearing away its sin in the cross.

We sometimes find it hard to connect with biblical terms, particularly given the western mindset—which values qualities such as freedom, education and self-improvement.

When we've been brought up to believe that we can make free choices; that education is the key to solving the world's problems; or that with enough effort, money or time we can create a 'new you', some of the Bible's teaching is deeply contradictory.

Group Discussion

1. Read the following verses around the group and take notices of how these passages contradict our natural assumptions about self-improvement: John 8:34; Ephesians 2:1–5; Romans 5:6,8,10.

In what ways do these passages contradict our natural assumptions?

In each of these readings, who is it that does the saving?

Why is self-improvement a threat to the message of the cross?

2. Selfish or self-centred love wears many masks. One of the most common is religion.

Zealous love (for God! for a good cause!) can generate intense heat and emotion. The apostle Paul was very zealous for God, and he devoted his life even as a young boy to serving the Lord, but it did him no good.

Share what you know about the life of Apostle Paul. Where did he come from? What was his upbringing? What did he believe? What work did he take pride in?

Paul ended up being a member of one of the strictest sects of the Pharisees. These were men who really thought they loved God. They were convinced that they were right, that others, even in Israel, were wrong.

Read what Paul has to say about himself in **Philippians 3:1–11**.

Why does Paul consider all his past achievements as worthless?

Paul still loves the Lord with a passion, but what has changed?

What does Paul strive for now? (v10)

³ Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 30, p. 293). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. Alt.

3. In John 8, Jesus is speaking with a group of people just like Paul ... and surprisingly like us.

Read **John 8:31–59**. Note the themes of freedom and slavery—and the hostile response to Jesus when he insisted that they were not free, but actually belonged to ‘their father, the devil’.

Why would these people respond with such hostility?

What is their mistake?

When Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus, Saul (as he was then known) was a man on a mission. He was fired with zealous love for God; but it was nothing but his self-righteous pride. His passion for God drove him to murder. After Jesus appeared to him everything changed. So what sort of love was it that transformed him? And what sort of love did he now have? Certainly not the ‘love’ he’d previously built his life on. It was not his so-called ‘love for God’ that would henceforth be the foundation for his life, but God’s love for him.

God’s supernatural love comes from outside of our selfish world and when it comes to us it changes everything. It changes our focus. It changes the way we see the world. It changes the way we act. God’s powerful love leaves nothing untouched in our lives.

4. In **Titus 3:3** Paul says (including himself), ‘... we were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved’. His zealous freedom and dogmatic certainty (which gave him a rationale to persecute the less holy and less law-abiding members of his own people) were but a manifestation of his own evil heart, dressed up as religion.

Read **Titus 3:4–7**.

What changed Paul’s life and relationships?

What are the gifts that Paul describes here which Jesus has given us to change us?

What level of change do you think Jesus intends for us here? 10% 50% 90%? Why?

Martin Luther wrote, ‘... to know God is to know His love at the same time ... He wants to be known by us as a reconciled Father, not as an angry Judge.’⁴

If God were to walk into the room right now, what would he think of you? Why?

If Jesus were to appear to you in a blinding light as he did to Paul, what do you think he might say to you?

What does God’s love mean to you? How would you describe it in your own words?

PRAYER

God, grant us the wisdom to listen attentively to your presence all around us. May we listen well to your dream for creation. May we listen well to our own lives. And may we listen well to the people and the place we call home. By your Spirit enable us to discern our calling and have the courage to act. Amen.

⁴ Luther, M. (1999). Luther’s works, vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 30, p. 293). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Bible Study 4... COMES TO LIFE

Reading Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37

Open in prayer.

Introduction

This week's sermon focused upon God's love coming to life in communities. God's love produces new expressions of human fellowship. It breaks down dividing walls, drowning old hostilities under the flood of his grace. Therefore this study will take us on a voyage of discovering God's communal love.

Consider the most troubling, protracted and bitter falling out you can imagine, or that you've been involved with.

You know the sort of thing: relatives not speaking to one another for years on end; estrangement that just goes on and on; and each and all justifying to themselves—and anyone who'll listen—why they are right.

Now turbo-charge it. Let it lead to bloodshed, even genocide. Let it fester for centuries. Let it breed suspicion, hatred and fear from one generation to the next. Let it bring forth terrorism.

And now let's have all that with divine justification.

Let the divisions, hatred, and even bloodshed, be legitimised by appealing to the Scriptures.

When you're at that point you're only just beginning to understand the world of the New Testament.

Paul was a religious zealot, of the strictest sect of the ancient Pharisees. They didn't want Israel to repeat the sins of the past. Israel had been sent into exile because of its disobedience to God and protracted rebellion.

The Pharisees wanted everyone to obey the holy writings and respect the long-standing traditions. They wanted to honour God, and believed that God would be pleased with them if they tried hard to venerate him, not least by purifying the nation of the ungodly. They were the moral policemen of the nation, in high-vis clothing. They were on God's side, so that Israel would be kept in step. If only that could happen long enough and well enough, the Messiah might come!

So, when you read statements like this from Paul's pen, 'There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free', you realise that something momentous and impossible must have happened. Here whole communities were living in the love and freedom that faith in Jesus brings.

Ah ... there's the key!

The divisions and hostilities we've been speaking of had a powerful catalyst: religion.

Religion, not faith; a life lived law-way, not Spirit-way. It's self-righteousness, not gospel righteousness. It's holier than thou, not least of all.

We can barely understand what the New Testament Christian communities were like. The world had never seen anything like it! Jews and Gentiles were eating together, rejoicing in one another's new-found freedom in Christ. Their homes were open to one another. They were learning about one another's history and culture, all through the new eyes Jesus had given them. Jews and Samaritans, slaves and free, male and female, were serving one another in love, freely giving and receiving. Each was now a member one body: one of the other and all together they members of Christ. They honoured one another, prayed for one another, served one another, cared for one another.

In fact, if you take a list of all the 'one-anothers' in the New Testament they cover the whole gamut of life ... a life lived in love.

It was, literally, love come to life.

Group Discussion

1. Read **Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37**.

What are these believers doing?

Why are they doing this? (Look at the immediately preceding context in Acts 2:36–41)?

How would you describe the kind of love that they are showing each other?

2. Look at **Ephesians 2:11–22**.

What do you know about the hostilities between Jews and Gentiles?

Now what has happened to remove that hostility?

On what basis was this possible?

What practical difference might this have made in the lives of people who had lived with the enmity for generations?

The Pharisees showed their love for God by judging and condemning others, and by keeping themselves separated from outsiders. How different is God's love to ours! God did not judge or condemn us, even though we had rebelled against him.

In John 3:17, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has not come to condemn the world but to save it!

Paul and the other apostles almost needed to invent a new vocabulary to describe this new kind of love that Jesus brought to them.

The Greek they used had a number of words for 'love', describing different types of relationships, but the New Testament writers didn't find these sufficient.

They took a little known word—*agape*—from the fringe of the Greek dictionary and filled it with a new meaning.

This is the sort of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

3. Read **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**, and then the comments from Martin Luther below (from his commentary on 1 John 4).

For nature loves, praises, does good, and speaks well as long as it has not been offended. But when you injure nature or oppose its will, then it does its own work, and its love falls away and turns to hatred, shouting, malice, etc. For its clinging was a matter of appearance, not of truth. It loved the person and the outward appearance, not the reality itself. It was a friend, not of the neighbour but of the neighbour's goods and property. Love, however, never falls away. It bears all things, believes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:7). It loves an enemy as well as a friend. Neither does it change when the neighbour changes; for just as the neighbour remains a neighbour, no matter how much he changes, so love remains love, no matter how much it is injured or aided.

But Christian love is a strong kind of love that perseveres in the midst of trouble, approves its friendships on the basis of the services it renders, seeks the advantage of others, and is ready to give, not to receive. Indeed, genuine love hands out good things and accepts evil things; but carnality accepts good things and hands out evil things or at least takes flight.⁵

What differences stand out to you between God's new love and the old selfish human love?

⁵ Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5-6; 1519, Chapters 1-6. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 27, pp. 353–354). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Where and how have you experienced God's love in your life?

What changed for you when that happened?

The love of God comes to life in us through the gospel, which is to say, through Jesus himself. It's not just that he speaks to us in the preached word, but he comes to us in the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not only reminders to us of God's love, but are also the ways through which that love comes to us in tangible form. In Holy Communion we have the word of God's love in a form we can taste and touch. But at every point, the emphasis falls on him, not us. It's his grace, his faithfulness, his love. These are our security.

So, along with Paul our main concern should be to see 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). He knew that to return to the old arguments—in his case about circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath keeping—was to return to bondage. The freedom of love would be eaten away by the acid of legal religion. We can't come to God on the basis of anything we claim about ourselves. If that were the case, Christ died for no purpose.

4. Read **Galatians 5:13–26**.

Why do we need the Holy Spirit to guide us and to help us to live this new kind of love?

How does he do this?

Why might the Spirit's work in us be described as fruit, rather than as deeds?

What is the difference?

Love comes to life, in us.

Note the plural. It's not just in me (though that is true, too), but in us.

God's love is relational. It comes from the relationships between the Father, Son and Spirit. They open themselves up to us, to receive us, but even more, to make us participants in their life. We're not spectators, but participants.

God brings us into relationship with himself, and in so doing he brings us all into relationship with one another in him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way:

... a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Among men there is strife. He is our peace,' says Paul of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:14). Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God, and among men. Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together. To eternity he remains the one Mediator.⁶

Life is inescapably relational. Where relationships are full and rich, life is full and rich. Where they're in tatters, life is hard, no matter how much we might try to fill the gaps with money, fame or power. What experiences have you had of a relationship being restored and healed? What difference did these experiences make in your life? If Jesus is the source of God's love coming to life in us, and the Holy Spirit is the agent, how can we let that love grow in our lives? In the church?

PRAYER: Faithful, Hopeful and Loving God, Help us to see the numerous temptations to avoid our true responsibilities and to transcend our limitations. Come to us, and form us as people who are faithfully present as Jesus Christ was faithfully present. Amen.⁷

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, HarperCollins, 1954) p. 23

⁷ Sparks P, Soerens T, Friesen DJ. *The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove IL, Kindle Edition. 2014). P73

Bible Study 5

FORMING LOVE. LIFE COMMUNITIES - WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE

Open in Prayer Readings: Matthew 5.14-16 Message; Romans 10.12-14

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. (Matthew 5.14-16 Message)

Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved." But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? (Romans 10:12-14)

Introduction

Is Jesus calling you into the family business; *the renewal of all things*? To 'keep open house', so that people may open up to God; to be 'generous with your life' so that all people everywhere may discover this generous Father in heaven'?

This message of reconciliation which we proclaim is for the healing of the whole of humanity and ultimately of the whole creation.

Therefore the love of Christ compels us.... Our firm decision is to work from this focused center: One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own (2 Corinthians 5.13-15).'

This "...focused centre..." on a "...far better life than one could ever live on our own" is the big idea in Paul's letters to the various churches he wrote to as he explained to them who we are 'in Christ'.

It begins with our Baptism and works out in our everyday walk with God in various ways. For example,

In our worship:

As believers we have been raised up with Christ into a place of communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Romans 8.30; Eph. 2.6). This is the embedded (rooted, surrounded, implanted) place from which we worship, as we enter into Christ's perfect worship God comes to us in His Word and in the bread and wine (Hebrews. 8.1-6).

In our prayers:

It is from this place in Christ that we pray in His name as we see that we are caught up in Christ's perfect prayer life (John 17, Heb. 10.19).

In our relationships:

It is from this place that we see others as not only made in God's image but also justified by his bodily sacrifice (2 Corinthians. 5.16-17).

In our mission:

It is from this place that we live in the fullness of Christ's life in the Spirit (Romans 15.29) which compels us to love all people, to serve them and to share with them our greatest treasure – Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4.7). It is from this place that we listen to and echo the Master's call upon every person 'Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life' (Matthew 11:28-30 Message).

Embedded in Christ we engage with others and the creation. We respond to Jesus' invitation to 'walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace' (Matthew 11:28-30 Message).

This requires that we are not doing mission to pay for our sins, to earn God's approval or for self-importance, but rather because we are working with Jesus in the family business, '...making all things new' (Revelation 21:5).

What does your participation in the love that renews all things look like?

We all have different roles within the task of local mission.

Some of us are called to serve the GROW aspect of our mission; offering people who are Christians to grow in Christ through offering opportunities for Worship (Word & Sacrament) and service.

Others amongst us are called to serve in the GO aspect of our mission; offering people who are not yet Christians to come to Christ through offering opportunities to be invited into God's family.

Grow and **Go** are ongoing tasks that intertwine. There is no linear sequence that says first we *grow* until we reach maturity, after which we begin to *go* into the world. If we wait until we feel ready, most of us will never *go*. Rather it is ***as we go that we grow***.

We don't seek to learn a whole lot of things just in case we need them, but as we *go* we discover what we need to study and how we need to be equipped and so we *grow*.

As Paul says to Philemon, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." [NIV v6]

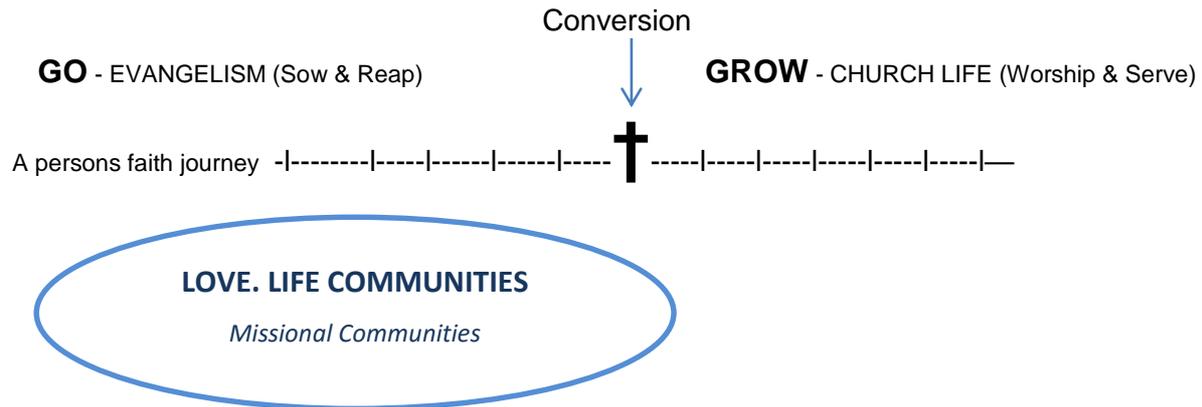


So how does this work out in practice in the local congregation?

By continuing to develop the opportunities for Christians to worship and serve AND by forming a community of practice 'where love comes to life' in the GO area. We call this new team, this new kind of small group dedicated to local evangelism missional communities - Love. Life Communities.

This is important because the GO aspect is as important as in the GROW aspect.

Pathway of Evangelism Engagement



What is a Love. Life Community? It is a new kind of small group within the Congregation or Parish dedicated to local evangelism. Soon we will launch our own Love. Life Community.

Would you like to join such a group who will do a series of 8 Bible studies after which you can decide to start serving in that team to GO do local mission? If after the study you decide that is not for you then you can work out how you can serve or continue serving in the GROW area of congregational life.

Play video – LOVE. LIFE COMMUNITIES 3

Series Conclusion

In this our first RENEW Mission Life season on the theme *Where Love Comes To Life*, we have learnt that it is in God that we find love. It is in God that we find our true identity and purpose for living. This is because love has always been alive in the Divine Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A missional life is a participation in the shared life of Father, Son and Spirit and a participation in Gods proclamation of this life to the whole of creation (Mark 16:15). This is *why we go* and *make disciples* of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28.19 NLT)

Will you say today, *here am I Lord, send me?*

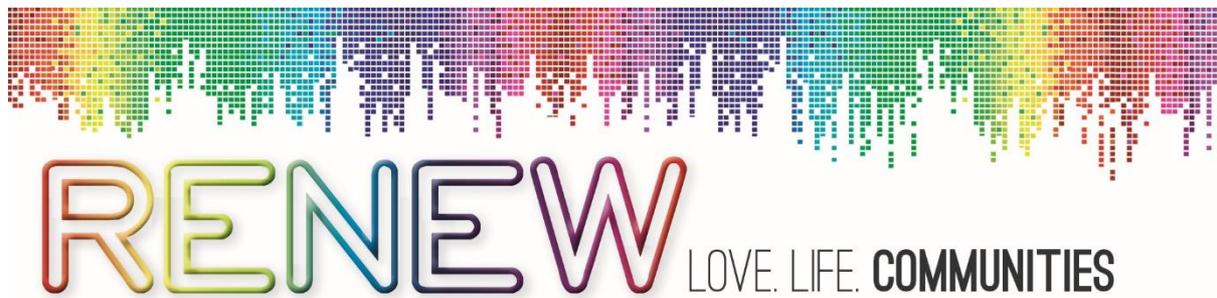
Group Discussion

1. What impacted you or stood out for you from the biblical passages expounded in this study? Why?
2. What questions were raised for you?
3. Do you want to explore Love. Life Communities (Missional Communities) further by signing up for this eight week journey of discovery?

PRAYER

You are the God who makes extravagant promises. We relish your great promises of fidelity and presence and solidarity, and we exude in them. Only to find out, always too late, that your promise always comes in the midst of a hard, deep call to obedience. You are the God who calls people like us, and the long list of mothers and fathers before us, who trusted the promise enough to keep the call. So we give you thanks that you are a calling God, who calls always to dangerous new places. We pray enough of your grace and mercy among us that we may be among those who believe your promises enough to respond to your call. We pray in the one who embodied your promise and enacted your call, even Jesus. Amen.⁸

⁸ Brueggemann, W. *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: The Prayers of Walter* (Augsburg Fortress, MN. 2003). P.533



What Next?

It starts by doing the 8 week RENEW **Love. Life Communities** bible studies.

Now that the RENEW Mission Life sermon and bible study series is completed consider registering your interest, with your Pastor or designated person, to commence the next stage of your local mission development. The next stage is for you and at least 3-8 other people to pioneer a **Love. Life Community**. This is a new team (community of practice) working in the evangelism space of your congregation. This team will become pivotal to sowing and reaping the harvest God wants to send your Congregation.

Love. Life Communities are a new kind of small group in your congregation doing evangelism in social networks, the local community, Schools and other places.

