



This service is the second in a series looking at our vision as Nottingham North East Circuit - "Equipping Transformation Through God's Love" - and what it might look like for us as churches, congregations and individual disciples to see it in our lives and communities.

The last time we thought about Vision together we asked the question "Why do you get out of bed in the morning?" In that service we considered our passions, *raison d'être* and driving force in life. What is it that motivates us as disciples? What do we seek to contribute, and what do we hope the outcome to be?

I suggested that we could look to Jesus to find his reason, which is echoed throughout scripture: Jesus got out of bed in the morning to "Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with His God," (Micah 6:8) so that those he met "May have life, and have it in abundance." (John 10:10)

In order for us to truly grasp that as a mission I think we need to go a bit deeper into understanding the driving force for the transformation we seek as a circuit: God's Love. That's what we're going to be considering today.

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As we come into this space of worship, from wherever we are and in the midst of whatever distractions of life are in and around us, let us allow for a moment of stillness and preparation.

Let us pray:

O Divine Lover,  
How relentless You are in drawing our attention to  
Your devotion to us: You embody Yourself in  
planets and worlds, in creatures and beauty and  
You fill our lives with colour and with joy.  
You decant Your desire for us into the hearts of  
our friends and families and touch us through their  
comfort and their compassion.  
Yours is a subversive, uncontainable love, O  
Beloved. It finds us even when we try to hide; It  
reaches us, though all the world would seek to  
build walls against it. And it has invaded our  
hearts, softening them and igniting love for You in  
us.

We praise You for this love. And we bring the love-  
token of our worship in return.

(John van de Laar)

As we begin to think about the bewildering Love of God, let us consider the words of Charles Wesley's hymn:

**And can it be** that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above —  
so free, so infinite his grace —  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffused a quickening ray —  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,  
my chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
and clothed in righteousness divine,  
bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

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We'll be drawing snippets of verses from throughout the New Testament during this service. Whilst God's love is evident throughout scripture and underlies the whole story of God and God's people, it is revealed to us most spectacularly and radically in the person of Jesus. Our primary reading is one that is often used to think of love, and one that I had as part of my wedding in 2009. **1 John 4:7-21** is titled "**God Is Love**" in the NRSVA.

## GOD IS LOVE

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

It would be remiss of us to be seeking to understand this love without helping ourselves with a reminder of more of Wesley's wonderful words, again often sung at weddings:

**Love divine, all loves excelling,**  
joy of heaven to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesu, thou art all compassion,  
pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation,  
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,  
let us all thy life receive;  
suddenly return, and never,  
never more thy temples leave.

Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see thy great salvation,  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise!

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## God First Loved Us: God for ALL

When I think about love I think about music and poetry, and when I think about poetry I think about my favourite poet Harry Baker. Harry Baker is a former world slam poetry champion. For those unaware of what "Slam Poetry" is, I want you to imagine some underground, smoke-filled room in a pub where people gather around for some sort of fight, perhaps with bets being made around the room. Now instead of the "fighters" being muscular men, or some sort of animal, they are poets battling with words, taking it in turns to out do each other with poetry on the spot.

Anyway, Harry realised that he should write a poem about love if he was going to be accepted as a proper poet, but also wanted it to be cool so added dinosaurs, and so composed my all-time favourite poem: "Dinosaur Love". (<https://youtu.be/LdjNw8SZc5U?t=145>)  
The poem begins:

"I want to say I love you  
But it seems it's not enough  
Because when people say I love you  
It can mean a lot of stuff  
Like I've always got your back  
Or I'm glad I'm not alone  
Or if I'm honest I'll say anything so you'll hang up  
the phone  
Cos I'm kind of in the middle of something right  
now and these Dr. Who box sets aren't going to  
watch themselves..."

Love means a whole host of different things. I can tell my wife that I love her, and my kids that I love them, and in the next breath I can tell you that I love bacon. But those loves are not equal nor the same. They need responding to and expressing in completely different ways!

I was left trying to convey my love for my wife in June as it approached our wedding anniversary. I found some space a whole week before the day to nip to Tesco to secure a card for the occasion. As I looked down the aisle I saw the cards with the images and flowers, the poems and romantic sentiments, and yet I found myself drawn to a relatively plain card. The black text on the white card simply read:

"There's no one I'd rather sit in silence  
and stare at my phone with."

It was perfect. So "me", and my wife would appreciate it.

A week later, the day before our wedding anniversary, my wife remembered that our anniversary was approaching and was able to get to Tesco to go and buy a card for me. As she looked down the aisle she saw the cards with the images and flowers, the poems and romantic sentiments, and yet she found herself drawn to a relatively plain card. The black text on the white card simply read:

"There's no one I'd rather sit in silence  
and stare at my phone with!!!"

When we exchanged cards on our anniversary we looked at each other and smiled. Beautiful synchronicity. My wife's smile didn't last long though. I watched as the realisation dawned on her face and she slowly held her head in her hands and choked back the tears. When she had composed herself she explained her revelation: I have changed her. 14 years ago when we married she was a different person. She would have been swayed by the romantic cards, the ones with the images and sentimental messages, but my influence in her life has meant that she was instead attracted a humour that matches mine!

It has to be noted that her disappointment was temporary, and that largely the influences have been hers on me for the better, rather than her changing to be more like me. But I think there are at least two observations in this experience.

Firstly it says something about us: **Love changes us.**

Love doesn't force change but we find our identity and character become shaped by the loving relationships we have. As our identity shifts we grow into newer versions of ourselves. The love we are given isn't given on the basis that we become different however.

When we come to the love of God this is something that we need to be aware of. Romans 5:8 declares that "God demonstrates his own love

for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" and in the passage we read earlier John has also told us that this is the ultimate expression of God's love for us. Even when we weren't all we could be, even when our image and identity weren't fully formed, God loved us by becoming flesh and dying for us. Even in our flawed state we were lovable and loved, worthy of God's love.

Those of us who have encountered that love, and have accepted that we have life to discover in Jesus have discovered the opportunities for change and growth into who we are. But again, those changes aren't demanded by the love, but inspired in response to the love. It is about growing into the relationship and adopting the character of the Divine Lover.

And secondly it says something about what it is to be loved: **Love is where we dwell.**

In our small house there is that moment when the kids have been sent to bed but they're still awake and could still hear the TV or conversation that's happening in the living room. In that moment we crash on different seats and rest. We don't interact with each other. We turn to stare at our phones and sit in silence. It's not that we're ignoring each other, or that we don't like each other, but there is a comfortability in the silence which means we are content just to be in each other's presence.

John uses the idea of "abiding" in relation to the love of God. In my mind to abide is to dwell or to bask. It is to be aware of the presence and to need nothing more in that moment. It is not the whole purpose and power of the relationship, and yet it is a key factor. The love of God is a place to be content and comfortable to dwell.

That can be a difficult thing to do. It can be hard to be loved and to let ourselves rest in that love. Sometimes we feel compelled to do, to show, to earn the love that we are given, as if we are not enough to be loved.

That's the problem with knowing ourselves isn't it!? We know those bits that we love less about ourselves, and therefore we question who could love us with those quirks or flaws. In those times love becomes a place of discomfort and doubt rather than rest and restoration.

What would it mean for your to be reminded that you do not need to earn the love of God? What would it look like for you to bask and dwell and rest in the presence of God knowing that there is nothing that can separate you from that love?

Ultimately our faith declares that God is love, and that "God" and "Love" are inseparable. More than that, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us (Romans 8:31-39). Whilst we might

struggle to find the right words or cards or sentiments to communicate our “love” for our spouse, child or bacon, we have a definitive outworking of love shown to us in the person of Jesus:

“THIS is how we know what love is:  
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”

(1 John 3:16)

Us. ALL of us. Those in our faith community and beyond it. Whilst we were sinners, still far away, before we knew the love on offer, such love was given. Once, and for all.

It is a transformational love. It doesn't demand transformation before it is offered, but invites and inspires transformation in response to the love. It doesn't require us to change from being who we are, but to grow in our identity and become more of ourselves through relationship.

How might the knowledge of this love have changed you? What might it have to offer those around you?

I always thought it was Wesley who coined the “Four ‘Alls’ of Methodism”:

“All need to be saved.  
All may be saved.  
All may know themselves saved.  
All may be saved to the uttermost.”

However our recently relocated Superintendent corrected me. He'd also rebuke me if he knew I wanted to change them!

There's a lot of tricky theology around about what it means to be “saved”, too much to go into now, but for the purposes of this moment of challenge I want to substitute that word out:

“All need to be **loved**.  
All may be **loved**.  
All may know themselves **loved**.  
All may be **loved** to the uttermost.”

The Methodist Church is committed to this love, and our God, being for ALL people. The “God for All” strategy of the Connexional church is our way of putting our faith into practice. At its heart is the desire for all to have the opportunity to respond to the love we have been considering.

Our reflections have so far focused on the initial provision of a love that is for all. Shortly we'll look at how that love may be claimed and known by those yet to encounter it.

As we've considered God's love for us, I wonder how you have felt? I wonder how you feel challenged to respond (or not as the case may be!)?

This is a journey which Isaac Watts went on whilst considering the love of God as offered through the death of Jesus. I have restructured this well-known hymn to bookend it with the wonderful last verse:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.

**When I survey the wondrous cross,**  
on which the Prince of Glory died,  
my richest gain I count but loss,  
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
save in the death of Christ my God;  
all the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.

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Let us spend some time in prayer in response to such love:

Loving God who conceived life,  
originates ingenuity, embraces individuality,  
welcomes everyone, celebrates diversity,  
encourages unity, offers serenity,  
gifts simplicity, lavishes compassion,  
we worship you!

We come before you as ourselves, our beauty and our flaws, made whole by the riches of your grace, forgiven through the love of Christ.  
Help us to be all we can be in your image, discovering life in all its abundance.

Living Jesus, who breathes our air,  
walks our streets, feels our pain, sheds tears,  
enjoys company, bubbles with laughter,  
holds our hands, we worship you!

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We bring you our pain, our tears and fears, our friends and families and their cares and concerns, our communities and those we know who need your presence. Jesus, be present in your world in and through us.

Gentle Spirit who strengthens fragile spirits,  
shelters the suffering, respites life and hope,  
transforms all sorrow, binds broken hearts,  
sets captives free, we worship you!

Spirit breathe into our world. Be ever-present with those who suffer in a whole host of different ways. Bring them peace. Be ever-challenging to those of us who have the power to change that suffering, bring us both discontent and courage.

Beautiful Trinity of Love,  
for your presence in our lives,  
for your comfort and company,  
for shaking us out of tired routines,  
and calling us ever to follow you  
then blessing our journey  
with unexpected discoveries,  
expanding our horizons,  
tendering endless encouragement  
and traveling with us,  
we worship you!

(Louise Gough)

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Let's continue to offer ourselves in response to such love with the words of this song by Geoff Bullock:

**Lord, I come to you,**  
let my heart be changed, renewed,  
flowing from the grace that I found in you.  
And Lord, I've come to know  
the weaknesses I see in me will be stripped away  
by the power of your love.

*Hold me close,  
let your love surround me;  
bring me near, draw me to your side.  
And as I wait, I'll rise up like the eagle,  
and I will soar with you,  
your Spirit leads me on  
in the power of your love.*

Lord, unveil my eyes,  
let me see you face to face,  
the knowledge of your love as you live in me.  
Lord, renew my mind,  
as your will unfolds in my life in living every day  
by the power of your love.

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## **Therefore we Love:** Justice Seeking Church

If John is to be believed and all may be loved, and we can truly see the need for all to experience the transformational love of God, then how do we as disciples help people to know that they are loved and to experience love to the uttermost?

Earlier I referenced the first half of a verse from 1 John 3. We need to complete it to help compound our "why" from last time:

"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 and sisters."

1 John 3:16

Or as our reading said more simply:

"We love **because** God first loved us."

1 John 4:19

We love others because of the love that we have been shown. We love others so that they may know themselves to be loved.

We live in a world where many are starved of love, stripped of value and are unable to comprehend the transformational love of God through lack of experience of love from humanity. How can our world be expected to believe they are loved and lovable by the God we proclaim when there is an absence of love towards them from our world?

I find it hard to know that I am loved and lovable, and yet society often favours me because of my gender and skin tone. I have a value that is definable in the contributions I am able to make to the world around me and the material things I have in return: I am supposedly worth a salary... but even then I doubt myself from time to time. If those things were stripped away, how much harder it would be for me to believe I am worth being loved!

Part of the "God for All" strategy of the Methodist Church is the commitment to being a "Justice Seeking Church." In order for people to know they are loved by God people need to see love in action towards them in the world, and we do that in our advocacy and striving for a more just society.

At Conference this year over 10% of the nearly 700-page agenda was given over to a report titled "Justice Seeking Church." It is clearly a priority of the church, and one that will be shared widely in the months to come. Having read the report and

