

Love Matters

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From a young age, I was taught pretty clearly about what God wants *from* us and what we can want from God. But when I think about what God wants *for* us, I can't help recalling the internet meme that says, "Beer is proof that God wants us to be happy." The early training I got as a Southern Baptist had nothing to do with being happy, and what God wanted for us was at best contradictory—but throughout my own life and faith practice, the more I've focused on Jesus's invitations to love one another, the happier my faith has become.

Using the Bible to tell us what God wants for us is tricky. So much of the Old Testament originated in the oral tradition, in the centuries before the technology of writing existed with which to record all those laws, histories, stories, poems, and legends. And while the events in the New Testament happened in literate cultures (Jews, Greeks, Romans, etc), Jesus's messages were not written down in the form we read them today until at least a generation after Jesus' lifetime. While the local common language was Aramaic, "the four **gospels were written** in Greek—and therefore by people more formally educated than almost all those who hung with Jesus. The **Gospel** of Mark probably dates from c. AD 70, Matthew and Luke around AD 85, and John AD 90–110. Despite the traditional attributions to specific authors, all four are anonymous, and most scholars agree that none **were written** by eyewitnesses." Given the facts surrounding our source for God's will or Jesus's words, perhaps drawing conclusions about "What God wants

for us,” or “What Jesus intended us to know” is not really possible. Perhaps, instead, we can ask ourselves what kind of religious tradition did we inherit from early Christians? How did they conceive of the essence of the faith we still practice today?

Beginning at the beginning—with Jesus’s birth—we can take seriously the message the angels brought to the shepherds in the fields:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people...on earth, peace, good will toward men.”

Literally the first divine message the early Christians conveyed in the Gospels promoted joy, peace, and good will. This birth of joy was grounded in God’s love for us, as Jesus’s later messages make plain. And the joy, love, glad tidings, and the rest extend to every one of us, as Jesus’s words and actions made clear.

Consider, as one example, the parable of the sower. As we read in Luke, “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” Probably the only thing we can truly *know* about this parable is that Jesus isn’t talking about farming. Surely no actual farmer, then or now, would waste so much seed on infertile ground. Traditional interpretations view the seed as the word of God, and the ground as various conditions

of the soul. So if the soul is ready for the word, the word flourishes there; but if it's hard and rocky, or weedy, etc, the seed doesn't grow. I'd like to look at this from a different angle: Where does the seed go? Why does the sower even bother wasting seed on rocks and weeds, or on the path? The parable extends the faith to everyone, no matter their condition. The sower doesn't "waste" seed on the barren places; he throws it there on purpose, just in case. If even one heart is made glad, the sower has done his job well.

A couple of other parables continue this thread: The parable of the Good Shepherd, in which a shepherd with a large flock discovers that one sheep is missing, also stresses the importance of including everyone in the fold. The shepherd leaves the flock to recover the one lost sheep.

Similarly, we all know the story of the prodigal son, who demanded his inheritance NOW, proceeded to waste it, and returned home willing to be a servant on his father's lands. The father rejoices that his son was lost, but has been found; and the father forgives the son and restores him to his previous status. The elder brother's objections have no sway: the father celebrates the return of his younger son.

Both parables point to love as a central motivator for the divine. Both shepherd and father are metaphors for the godhead, and in both instances, god reaches out for even one—puts the welfare and happiness of the one over that of the many, safe in their

herd; or throws a party for the lost son, even though the party offends the one who stayed and behaved.

Jesus's actions reinforce his parables. Think of Zaccheus, the diminutive tax collector who climbed a tree so he could see Jesus pass, and with whom Jesus chose to dine. Consider how Jesus took a risky move by welcoming lepers, visiting and curing them. Among his disciples were several fishermen, a tax collector, a thief, a zealot. Jesus frequently chose to spend time among the marginal, the outcast, and the poor, rather than the rich, the powerful, the in crowd. Still, he gave his message to the lawyers and pharisees as well. This sower cast his seed everywhere. In the midst of a challenge from the Sadducees and the Pharisees, Jesus presented the core of his message:

“ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ‘This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. ‘All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

All the law and the prophets. Jesus often said that he came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it. Here he tells us directly how that happens. One hundred thirty-two times the gospels present Jesus urging us to love. Thirteen times over the four gospels, Jesus tells us, specifically, to love one another. One another includes everyone: Samaritans, thieves, Romans, lepers, and more. A key portion of the Sermon on the Mount defines the ultimate extent of this love:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the faithless do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Perfect, in the language of the Bible, means “whole” or “complete.” To be whole, to be complete, even as God is, means to love everyone, everywhere. We don’t get to choose whom to love; we just love everyone. Lost, found; prodigal, dutiful; friend, neighbor, or enemy; local or foreigner; self or other. Practicing love is a core value of this religion we have inherited.

As I said at the beginning, the Gospels can’t be taken as, well, gospel. I’m reminded that Thomas Jefferson deleted from his Bible every word attributed to Jesus, since those quotations could not be accurate. The underlying spirit, though, the fabric of the message, tells us that our heritage—our birthright, if you will, is love, the cornerstone of the gospels’ portrayal of Christ.

Since the mid-1990s, technologists have told us that we have moved out of the Information Age and into the Attention Economy. What grabs our attention wins. The greatest challenge we face in practicing love today may be focusing on love to begin

with. So much competes for our attention. We need to will ourselves to look for love, to create that positive presence in our lives and the lives around us. The Apostle Paul said, “**Love** never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ... And now these three **remain: faith, hope and love**. But the greatest of these is **love**.”

Love, then, is our birthright. We know from the Bible that the early Christians made love the cornerstone of their practice. We know who we come from. But what about us? Who do we want to be? From Martin Luther King, Jr’s admonition that only love can drive out hate, to Bob Marley’s version of what the angels said at Jesus’s birth (Don’t worry, Be happy. Every little thing is gonna be all right.), our culture gives us many definitions of love and many reasons to love and be loved.

Many ancient and contemporary voices illuminate love for us. Seneca called it “spiritual fire.” Gandhi equated love with life itself: “Where there is love, there is life.” Jean Anouilh tells us that love is, above all, the gift of oneself.”

The wise among us have much to say about the healing powers of love. Sophocles said that love frees us of all the weight and pain of life. Einstein claimed that love is a better teacher than duty, and Hubert Humphrey noted that “The greatest healing therapy is friendship and love.” Lao Tzu, most famous for *The Art of War*, also advised, “Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.”

We begin by loving ourselves, something that the assurances granted by faith help us do.

Benjamin Franklin: If you would be loved, love, and be lovable.

Buddha: You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.

Wayne Dyer: Loving people live in a loving world. Hostile people live in a hostile world. Same world.

Goethe tells us that we are shaped and fashioned by what we love, echoing Jesus's message that where our heart is, there also our treasure lies. Balzac observed that "The more one judges, the less one loves." Perhaps that's why the New Testament warns us, "Judge not, lest you be judged," and Oscar Wilde advises us, "Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead." "Your task is not to seek for love," says Rumi, "but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." That great sage, Paul McCartney, tells us "All you need is love," To which Charles Schultz adds, "But a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt." Love helps us break down barriers within ourselves, as well as barriers we raise between ourselves and others. James Baldwin wrote, "Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

So let's set out to carry our heritage of love into the present. "Don't brood," advised Leo Buscaglia, "Get on with living and loving. You don't have forever." Time is one exigency,

but not the only one. Jesus's central message was the command for us to bring our faith to life with love. And Morrie Schwartz puts it this way: "The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in." Vincent van Gogh, a man of great talent and ability who also knew much about the weight and pain of life, advised us to "Love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well."

Let us love one another. Amen.