

Mal 3:1-4; Lu 1:68-79; Phil 1:3-11; Lu 3:1-6

What would you do for the one you love? Write a love poem – cook a great meal – do their chores for them? These are just a few ideas. But, let's drill down into loving and being loved. We might do things like writing and recording our last will and testament, cleaning out our collected treasures and junk so kids, nieces and nephews will not have to do the job when we are gone. These actions would show deeper love – with an eye to our loved one's future well-being. We might, if our love is strong and true, help our loved one to overcome obstacles in their lives: addictions, unfortunate attitudes, hatreds they have held onto with clenched fists over the years. Scary. Our loved one might stop loving us if we show so much concern – such compassion – so much love for their soul and for their spirit.

Consider this world – this life – from the Creator God's perspective. We are not like God, but we can make analogies from the loving relationships we have with others: parents or parent figures, spouse, children, very close friends, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Just living life with our children and grandchildren we are models of what we value, along with teaching basic hygiene and manners and the life skills they need. You will have noticed that the young people in your life say the things you say – and do the things you do. I had absent-mindedly left my earrings on the end table. Malcolm is two, and cruises at a lower altitude than the rest of us. He immediately found the things and of course, stuck them inside his ears. He has seen Mom and Grandma do something like that. We gently correct our little ones because we love them. If he wanders toward the wood stove, we might warn him much more sharply – even take him by the hand and move him away from danger. We don't want little ones to be hurt. Transfer that understanding to the way God loves you and me.

These are small examples of a much more impressive and ultimate love. Our Heavenly Father loves us so deeply that He is bringing us along in His ways – in His will for us. God loves us too much to allow us to continue toward destruction. This is a higher calling in our lives.

The psalmist writes: “Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, *otherwise* they will not come near to you.” (Ps 32:9) We do not want to be forced to do the will of God. We must come to it willingly – knowing how deeply He cares for us.

Paul writes to the church at Philippi: “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless...” (Phil 1:8-11) See how the apostle loves the people. He loves them for God’s sake – and God’s love is a transforming power in their life (and in our life) as the church. Paul writes to the church in the name of God in Christ.

Last week we considered the principle that God’s kingdom is the basis of reality. We are not to be duped by the unreal, the surreal, nor random visions of truth. The prophets bring a message of God’s radical, possessive, agape love

(unconditional love). He loves you and me when we are pleasing to Him. He also loves us when our life is a train-wreck of brokenness and rebellion. Thus says the Lord to His people, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jer 31:3)

The Prophet Malachi describes the coming of the Lord and the Lord’s messenger as a fiery and cleansing event. Not at all the “silent night, holy night” we celebrate. We recognize John Baptist and Jesus in his word. Can the Day of the Lord be both a purifying ordeal and a mild, gentle arrival? We have come to the aspect of God’s ways that some call contradictory and confusing. As a result, there are those who simply leave the whole divine project behind. A few say that surrender to God is childish or immature. Many more people say that **God can have** both a gentle and a demanding character. We understand it. Some persons find it in their hearts to listen to God’s promises with the hope and the love that are in God. God is our Heavenly Father and Jesus is our Brother. We grasp this best by the analogy of relationships in our lives.

I worked with a woman in a food pantry who had been in prison. She served most of an eight-year sentence for armed robbery and drugs. She had a few good friends in prison who shared the love of Christ with her. By the time she was released, she wanted to be part of the church – she is part of the church in N New Mexico. She particularly appreciated seeing that hungry people were fed. She asked for a copy of the *Recovery Bible*. Our team made sure she got one. This is what she said when I had the privilege of handing her the Word of God: “It feels so good,” she said, “to have those burdens lifted from me. I don’t have to look over my shoulder all the time. I am free, really free!” A business in Española took her application for a job and actually hired her. She has been a faithful employee for some years now. She is so happy to be serving the Lord Jesus Christ. She also facilitates a Bible Study in her church. She reaches out to those who are hungry for food and to those who are hungry for God’s unconditional love.

This morning, please pray with me for the one here who is in need of God’s unconditional love. (Jer 30:17 – 31:1-4a, 7) Amen.

‘For I will restore you to health
And I will heal you of your wounds,’ declares the
Lord,
‘Because they have called you an outcast, saying:
“It is Zion; no one cares for her.”’ (Jer 30:17)

The Lord appeared to him from afar, *saying*,
“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.
⁴ “Again I will build you and you will be rebuilt,
(Jer 31:3b-4a)