

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
21 September 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Fruit of LOVE Sunday (Community)

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Laboring in Love”***

Second Sermon in *Cultivating the Fruit of LOVE*  
Part of *Abide & Grow: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

### ***Mark 12:28-34—John 13:1-17; 34-35—1 John 3:17-18***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Shoveling the sidewalks of an elderly neighbor—a labor of love.

Providing pro-bono expertise to someone in an underserved community—a labor of love.

Being the one who meal plans, grocery shops, and cooks dinner for your household—a labor of love.

Going out of your way to pick up someone for church who cannot drive themselves—a labor of love.

Picking up all the packages down by the mail area in your building and delivering them to people’s doors so that the packages don’t sit down in the lobby too long unattended—a labor of love.

Without prompt or asking, driving up to the church midweek to clean and charge the hearing assistance devices so

they are ready for the next week—a labor of love.

A white person who has citizenship and privilege putting a sticker of a Mexican flag on the back of their truck in hopes that ICE will pull them over and ‘waste their time’ so that perhaps someone who is more vulnerable will not get pulled over—a creative labor of love.

I asked the collective wisdom of Chat GPT this week, “What is a labor of love?” They replied: “A labor of love is a task or project a person does out of passion, devotion, or care—rather than for financial gain, recognition, or obligation. Often “labors of love” are invisible to the outside world but can be meaningful to the person doing them, and sometimes, transformative for others.”

If you think about your week, I bet you can find places where you are the one offering a “labor

of love” and the one receiving a “labor of love.”

Labors of love are wonderful. They fill our lives with meaning; they have deep impact on our relationships and communities. They are a part of “laboring in love” but “laboring in love” goes beyond one-off actions or labors of love. Laboring in love is a whole mindset shift of who we see ourselves and God and others in relation to each other. Laboring in love is on-going, never-ending work. Need work. Life-giving work. But *work*.

Valarie Kaur, the founder of the *Revolutionary Love Project* and a classmate of mine from Divinity School, became an activist for Love when a Sikh father and family friend, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was the first person murdered in hate violence against Muslims and Sikhs in the aftermath of 9/11. In her book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, Kaur writes,

“Love” is more than a feeling. Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving—a choice we make over and over again. If love is sweet labor,

love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. [*this is good news*]

This labor engages all our emotions. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love.

Kaur has spent her career talking about how to embody and enact love in real relationships, in the midst of real tension and strife and difference, and as a Sikh woman of color, most definitely in the midst of oppression and obstacles.

As it was then, and is now, it is difficult right now to talk about “laboring in love” when we are so fractured and divided in our country, and even more so as those fissures exist run as fault lines through our own homes and families and communities and churches. But it’s precisely because love is hard and feels out of grasp and impossible right now, that we must draw near to the God of love and the daily practice of laboring in love so that we can grow and cultivate and ripen this “fruit of

the Spirit” in our branches. How do we expect the Fruit of Love to grow on the branches of our government, let’s say, if we’re not continually laboring to cultivate it in our lives on our branches?

Jesus is clear about this. There is a hierarchy of Fruits and Love is the cream of the crop. Love is the first fruit that matters and the last fruit that remains. Love is everything. Because God *is* love.

There is too much at stake to say, *“love is too hard to grow here”* or *“this is not the right climate for Love to bloom”* or *“love prefers a different kind of soil; we can’t grow that here anymore.”* As any farmer knows whose family and livelihood depend upon them figuring out how to get a crop to grow even in the most dire and difficult of climates or situations, giving up is not an option. So, they get creative in their cultivation techniques. And so too, must we. In the conditions surrounding us, in the climate we are in and have helped create and perpetuate (knowingly and unknowingly), in the soil we are all standing on—Love *must* grow.” And love takes labor. *Our* labor. And love is a fruit that cannot just

grow on one branch by itself. It is inherently relational. And connective and connecting. We cannot love alone. We can only love in relationship *to* and *with*. Laboring in love is an interconnected act of continual giving and receiving, learning and unlearning, risking and rewarding, comforting and challenging.

We have three texts today to help us explore how to embody love in a relational, communal, ecclesiological (church) way. Beginning in reverse order, first 1 John 3—which offers us a clear choice and action and way of ‘being’ in the world: we either embody love OR we block it.

Let me explain. In these two verses we have a very specific example of how we can determine if someone’s life is bearing the fruit of Love. It can’t just be in the *logos* (Greek) “words” we say or the *glossia* (Greek) “speech” we form with our tongue; it has to be in *ergon* (Greek), translated here as “deed,” but which means labor or “employment, that is in what we produce by hand, art, industry, mind, by whatever we accomplish with our lives,” and in *Alethia* (Greek) which means “truth,” as in something that is

objectively true by what we see with our eyes, something that is reality, “unconcealed,” or my favorite — “that which is not hidden.”

So, defining love is not a trick question or a philosophical debate.

Love is not supposed to be like one of those hidden picture games where they say, “can you find all 50 cats in this drawing?” Love is not a “Where’s Waldo” search for a particular striped shirt in the midst of other confusing stripes. Love is supposed to be as plain as day as the clothes we put on, or the coffee mug we are holding—when you look at it, it is what it is, what it is. No one is looking at a mug and saying well, maybe that’s a water bottle. No one is looking at our jacket and saying, well maybe that’s a pair of pants. No, a jacket is a jacket. A phone is a phone. A mug is a mug. And an act of love is an act of love.

You see, part of this passage is getting us to trust ourselves to “call a spade a spade.” To be able to say *that IS* love. And *THAT is NOT* love. I mean, we teach our kids it’s this simple: what is sharing? Sharing is a giving a toy that we have to a

child who doesn’t have a toy. If we do not give that toy to another child, we are not sharing. It’s quite simple.

But then we grow into adults and we make things really complicated by talking about our motivations and our intentions—that maybe something isn’t really what it is plain as day because we don’t know what the person is thinking or feeling.

Here’s the truth: No matter what the reasons that people had for walking by a person who is in a ditch and not helping them, the Samaritan who saw the person and stopped and acted in love is the one we call Good. They acted in clear unequivocal love. And the others who passed by the person in the ditch did not. They did not show love that person. Maybe they were on their way to show love to someone else or maybe we come up with an excuse or reason for them or ourselves because it’s hard to think about not helping someone in need but the reality is as plain as day before us that they did not show love or compassion or care to that particular person in that particular ditch at that time. Love is a concrete action, not a good intention.

As we are laboring in love, our acts of love should be plain and noticeable and clear to the people around us. Are we sharing our ‘toys’ or our ‘possessions or our time with others, or are we not? It’s not as complicated as we make it.

What we see and how we act and respond matters. I’ve heard people say a lot, “children are watching us,” and they are. Children learn a lot from the adults around us. Adults also learn a lot from the adults around them. I don’t know about you, but when I see other people stopping and laboring in love and engaging in actions that maybe I thought were risky in my head but that are now being normalized as I watch others engage in that behavior—I’m more likely to do it too. There is such a thing as good peer pressure, safety in numbers, or leading by example or good witness, but call it whatever you want: laboring in love is contagious. It’s one of the things I love about our Stedman Reading Partnership with New Hope. Showing up to read with a third grader is a bit out of my comfort zone. I’ve done it now for years. And now I’m comfortable with it. And I learned to be comfortable first by watching others who were

comfortable to do it, and then by following their lead and doing it, practicing it, laboring in it myself.

There are a few other important things about these two verses in 1 John 3. The Greek word that is translated as “has the world’s goods” is *bios*—which literally means “life, the state of existence in the present.” So lest we think that this verse is exclusively speaking to those who have a lot of material possessions (and somehow we always read these verses as being about people who have MORE than we do, in other words, we do not see ourselves as rich, even though we are by the world’s standards), but even if we were inclined to read this verses as being about the people who have a lot of stuff (or more stuff than we do) and they are being stingy with their stuff by not giving to the poor, the reality is that is not what this text says.

A more accurate translation is: “How can we say that God’s *agape* (self-giving unconditional love) abides in (or dwells, remain continually in) anyone who has *bios* (that is who has life in this moment, breath in their lungs, the gift of existence for today) and yet sees a brother

or sister in *need* (that is “lack of what is needed to sustain life (bios)” and yet “refuses to help?” (lit: shuts up their bowels on them?) I told you this gets very embodied! The Greek here is *kleio* (to shut up or cause to obstruct) and *spláchnon* (the bowels/ intestines (which back then meant the heart/liver/lungs); which for that culture was say these are the areas of tender affections, tender mercy. The place in our bodies were we sense and know what the right thing to do is, before our head gets involved and tells us why maybe it’s not the right thing to do.

Now as someone who is married to a partner with Crohn’s disease I know more about the bowels being “shut up” or “obstructed” than I would otherwise care to know, but it is perhaps one of the most painful things I have ever witnessed—to see someone without a bowel blockage. To not be able to release air, gas, or anything. Imagine if we are all taking in love and digesting it all the time but then that love has nowhere to go outside of our body, no way to be released...it is painful not only for the person who is holding in all that love (selfishly) but also painful for the one who needs the love,

needs the compassion, needs the tender care, needs the deed or labor of love...the one who is around them. It’s like the blueberry girl in Willy Wonka; love is not meant to be held within us just pressuring us to get bigger and bigger.

1 John 3 challenges us all as a world to ask, “How can any of us who are gifted with THIS day and who are still alive see someone (or an entire nation of people) who is hungry and not give them food? Not allow in clean water? Not provide them shelter? Is God’s love literally shut up inside of us? That’s impossible. God’s love is created to be a flowing, relational force. So, if we are not releasing it into the world, that might lead us to ask, is the agape (love) of God really dwelling in me or living in me (or in us as a people or nation)? If so, how could we allow such catastrophic suffering?

For many of us, I think we’d say, God’s love is living within us, but we do not know how to share it with those who are hurting so deeply. We get paralyzed and stopped up with inaction because we aren’t sure of the right action. But what if we just tried one thing and tried to share God’s love even if it



failed? What if we donated to an aid organization trying to get food into Gaza? What if we called our congress person to say that do not want our tax dollars supporting military action against innocent people in any country? What if we spoke up every time we heard someone say something that is anti-Palestinian or anti-Semitic? What if our “laboring in love” was speaking the reality of the suffering we see loud so that it does not go unseen or unwitnessed? What if it is as simple and clear and standing up to say, “it is not okay for trans-persons to be denied access to restrooms or healthcare. It’s just categorically not okay. Or to say, it’s not okay for human beings to be taken off the street and arrested because of how they look or what their last name is? That is just not okay. It’s not just or humane. Clear and simple.

Part of what 1 John 3 is trying to get us to do is simply take a risk when we see a need and act in love. To recognize that just to be alive is a gift and if we are alive, we are here to help preserve life in others. Period. End of sentence. Whether we agree with them or not; whether in the same party with them or not. Life is sacred and we need

to help others on this earth who are trying to breathe, breathe.

*That* is what it means to dwell in/abide in God’s love. We take God’s love in, we digest it, and we expel it and share it into the world. We do not sit on life or sit with love in our hearts and keep it to ourselves. We choose courage over comfort. We take risks for the exchange of compassion. We do not create blockages to the flow of God’s love.

We’ve seen a lot of “shutting off the bowels of compassion” this week, haven’t we? Standing firm in their stance. Unfriending or unfollowing people based on their response to the killing of Charlie Kirk and the aftermath of commentary on his life, the life of the killed him, the lives of his followers, the lives of those who were hurt by his beliefs and words, all of it. We’ve heard calls for further division and attacks and harms from the highest people in our government. We have heard a few calls for love, for nuanced conversation, for understanding, but not many.

Laboring in love is hard work that cannot be captured in sound bites. Laboring in love requires seeing people for the whole of

who they are and who God created them to be *and* for the actions and words they make (for good and for ill). Laboring in love requires us to be honest about how someone's harmful words and actions reveal what they believe to be true about others, even while holding the tension that we do not believe those same things to be true about them.

And Love has no room for discrimination. Even when we say harmful words about others, the economy of love does not work like an exchange where now it's okay for others to say harmful words about us. If someone serves up hate, we are not to volley it back. We are to stop the ball that's in play. Reset. And serve anew. Serve love.

And this is incredibly taxing. And hard. And exhausting. And fatiguing. And the people who are experiencing the hate, are not the ones who have to stop the game and serve up love. If we see them getting pelted with balls of hate, we need to ensure they get to the bench to rest and receive care. But we who are protecting them need to raise up our arm and stop the ball that it's in play. Protect them from getting pelted by the hate. We

stop and reset and serve love. The labor does not fall to victims. The labor falls to all of us who see another who needs help. And to be honest, sometimes we are the victim, sometimes we're the ally, and sometimes we are the ones lobbing hate. And we need what we're serving to be stopped by someone else. Often times though, as liberal progressive Christians who are white, we find ourselves as bystanders—watching but not knowing what to do.

And if you do not know how to be that support, start with taking a step back and looking for it in others. Become wonder-filled at anyone who can share compassion and mercy and love in these days. Watch for others who are stopping the game of hate and re-setting the game with love.

As Valarie Kaur writes, *“When suffering constricts the heart, awe stretches it back out, making us more compassionate, more loving, more present.”*

And this leads us to our second passage, John 13. Which is a familiar text that we read every Maundy Thursday as we remember the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before



his death and this act of great humility and service that he shared with his disciples—washing their feet. He is about to suffer greatly, and he is already suffering relationally, because he knows one of his close friends will betray him. Even in the pain of that knowledge and in the fear of what Jesus knows is coming to him physically and emotionally, he chooses this moment to not just break bread and bless the cup and give us a meal of remembrance about his love. He chooses to give an action, a labor, of love, that we are ALSO supposed to do. It's curious to me that the Lord's Supper/Eucharist/Communion has become a sacred meal of remembrance that we Christians the world over repeatedly do to remember Jesus' love and sacrifice on the cross – his death, but we do not enact every week or every month or every quarter this act of washing one another's feet. We just do it once a year, and even the one time we do it a year, it's not a high attended service, and not all who attend participate. This is not a judgment, it's an observation. A curiosity. What is it about washing one another's feet that we are uncomfortable with? Why do we omit this critical act of

service in our remembrance and ritual of Jesus' love?

It is the prelude to Jesus' new commandment that we "love one another." In fact, Jesus says, this kind of love is the 'marker of our discipleship': *"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,"* (John 13:35). By THIS. By acts that reveal a labor of love. By acts of service such as washing one another's feet.

People say they don't want to wash each other's feet because feet are gross and unsanitary and it's weird and awkward and uncomfortable. But I'm not sure that's all that is is. I mean, if you think about it, breaking off bread and everyone dipping it in the same cup is kind of gross and unsanitary. It's also sort of odd and awkward to say that we are eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ; those outside of our tradition would have every reason to wonder about if this is some kind of cannibalism or vampire type behavior, right? I mean really think about it. It's an odd ritual.

It's actually a lot odder than washing one another's feet. The most normal everyday thing in this passage is washing feet! But *this* is the act we struggle with. Why? Well, I think it's because of what it represents. Washing one another's feet and remembering the words of Jesus in this passage would mean that we would really have to want to remember and live out in our relationships and churches that there is not a hierarchy of positions or people in the embrace of God's love.

Without the tower of privilege and position that we've built we don't know how to hold onto our 'power' and by 'we' I mean those who hold power and privilege and are afraid of losing it because this country and our churches have told us that this power and position is what makes us feel important or gives our life meaning. But that is a lie of white supremacy that hurts all of us, especially those of us who are white. It is robbing us of our humanity and the chance to live in mutual aid and care and love with one another if we believe something about us making us higher than someone else.

So it's like this Jenga tower, where we are afraid to pull out

the wooden planks of white supremacy or any implicit system that helps us maintain this high tower we have built because if we pull it out we all come crashing down. The thing is, the tower is an illusion anyway, and it's supporting those who are worried about it crashing. Everyone else is already down below the tower on the ground working together, and learning the joy of mutual dependence. The tower just serves to maintain the lie of the white supremacy it supports.

But everything about this passage of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples subverts this. If a teacher can wash the feet of his students, then he is equalizing himself to them. And likewise, they are not just to receive the washing from him, they are to wash the feet of one another. If everyone is engaged in the same act of care—an embodied act of care that is related to our created human body and not related to what we do or where we're from or how we earn money—then everyone is on the same level of laboring in love together. Giving and receiving.

In fact, Jesus says to Peter—who is upset that someone as special and 'high up' as Jesus

would wash *his feet*—“*unless I wash you, you have no share with me.*” Meaning, if our leaders and teachers are not engaged in acts of service and humility and are with and for our citizens and students and congregants, then we are not worthy to be followed. And if we as leaders, teachers, pastors, anyone who have the power or privilege, do not invite others to wash our feet as well, we are not worthy to be followed. And we need to have our own feet washed to be shown what we do not know. So that we become the students for time to time.

You see, this is a labor of love that removes ‘station’ in life and says quite simply in the most human way possible: “We ALL are on a long journey. We ALL have been walking a long time. We ALL have dirty feet. We ALL need our feet to be washed. Nobody is above or below having our feet washed. And we can’t wash our own feet. I mean, we can try, but we can’t see every part of our foot (no matter how flexible we are), like someone else can. Someone else can see and clean nooks and crannies that we can’t see to clean.

This is a kind of laboring in love that depends upon giving and

receiving. And anytime we refuse to “wash someone’s feet” and miss that opportunity for them to wash our feet, we are saying that we see ourselves as better than them, whether we mean to or not.

This is a call for us as a church, an ecclesiological call (*ekklesia* means ‘the gathering’) so for the ‘gathering of Jesus’ followers, this is our instruction. The last act of service that Jesus and instruction gave us before his death.

Do we, the church, really see ourselves as equal to those around us? Or do we, the church, see ourselves as here to serve and help others as in “we have something that they do not have and we need to give them that thing,” whatever it is.

The truth is – we do have some things that others do not have and need, AND others have things that we in the church do not have and we need. And more often than not, we forget the latter. Foot-washing is a two-way labor of love. It invites us as a church to wonder and ask, “what gift do those who are not in our community have to give us?” How are we letting those around us “serve us/teach us/model for us God’s love”?

Do we see ourselves as the experts on God's love, or do we see ourselves as needing to *experience* God's love *from them* even as much as we *share* God's love *with them*?

The equality in relationship here is a powerful reminder to us all. That no matter who we are or what 'station' in life we are in by the worlds' standards or otherwise, part of abiding in God's love and bearing the Fruit of that Love is allowing ourselves to receive love and not just give love. (It keeps us from adopting a Savior mentality.)

Many of us are not great at admitting need or being vulnerable. That is part of bearing the Fruit of Love. Allowing the gift of Love that others have to give – be given. To *you*. Realizing they have something you need and you cannot live until the fullness of who you are in God's love without receiving what they have to give you.

And then, releasing that we, too, must serve and kneel and bend down and lower ourselves to people who feel 'higher' than – and serve them. I know all of us are tempted to think, "Oh but I don't think of anyone as lower

than me." If we're honest. We probably do. Not in theory. But *in practice*. In everyday practice.

You think you're a better driver than the person cutting you off in traffic. The better sibling for being the one that cares for your parents when the others don't. The better student for doing more work on the group project. The better colleague for jumping in to help others. The better 'contributing citizen of society' for being able to buy your own food and home and not live off 'assistance.' The better This or That because of This or That.

If we listen to our inner dialogue honestly, we will hear these little hierarchies in our head all the time. And sometimes they are the opposite. Everyone in this room is smarter than I am, prettier than I am, stronger than I am, more successful than I am... (And so on and so forth.)

An ongoing, life-long practice of laboring in love is truly learning to see one another as equal in the eyes of God, every person reflecting the divine image of God, ourselves included.

As James Baldwin beautifully wrote, *“The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other’s light.”*

By THIS, the world will know that we are following-Christ, by how we love one another, ***by how we see one another and are seen by others***, by how we serve one another and are served by others.

Jesus never says that people will know we are his disciples if we say we “believe in him” or if we “process our faith in him” or “accept him as our Lord and Savior.” Jesus never said any of that. Jesus said, *“people will know you are my disciples if you love one another.”* If you wash their feet and allow them to wash yours.

Do you see why this Fruit of Love is so critical? Why it is the most essential Fruit to nurture and grow on our branches?

And if we still needed convincing, Mark 12 seals the deal. This is when Jesus is talking with a scholar in his own Jewish tradition—a faith tradition of study, and debate and questioning—and is asked,

*“In all of Torah, in all of the ‘law’ or ways of living in right relationship with God, the Holy One—which commandment is the greatest?”* Where do we start?

I was blessed to receive teaching and insights on this passage yesterday by the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney—a biblical scholar of the Hebrew text—who was speaking at the *Prophetically Re-imagining the Church Conference* here in Denver hosted by Juniper Formation. A few things stood out to me from her teaching in terms of what this text has to say about ‘laboring in love’ as a community.

First, this was a conversation within Jesus’ community of faith, or as Dr. Gafney say, this was an “in-house conversation,” one Jewish scholar to another. It is an encouraging reminder to me that are each other’s best and most constant and continual teachers when it comes to cultivating these Fruit of the Spirit. We need each other; we need to ask each other questions; we are invited to be curious about our faith and our scriptures and our spiritual lives in community.

Then, it's how Jesus answers this question that is most clarifying as we seek to prioritize what it means to live as people of faith in the world.

There are lots of things we could be doing or focusing on, there are lots of needs we could meet and directions we could go, but Jesus funnels everything down narrowly to the foundations of our faith, while still giving us expansiveness to grow and make our faith our own as he answers.

Jesus answers this question, of course, by lifting up a key teaching in their shared faith tradition from Deuteronomy 6, the *Shema* (in Gafney's translation): "*Hear ye yisrael, The Holy One our God the Holy One is One (Singular/Unique). And you shall love the Holy One your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

The scribe would have known, and those who know Deuteronomy well would know that the original text from torah speaks of loving God with heart, soul, and might or strength (or body as some translations say), but *not* mind. Jesus, as Gafney points out, adds "mind" because

now his people are living as a colonized people in a place where Greek thought is prevalent and they are understanding themselves differently as a people now influenced by Greek culture. Greeks had a strong emphasis on the mind, whereas Hebrews emphasized the gut/body and heart more and the soul. Jesus, reading the context of his day and the culture of his people, adds in the "mind" because utilizing the mind is now something they do regularly now and they are speaking about that in all other areas of their life so they are going to love the one and only Holy God with all that they have, that means loving the Holy One with their minds is part of that teaching in terms of a whole-bodied faith expression of love.

In doing this, Gafney says, Jesus gives us permission to add our own versions of how we might explain (today) what it means to love the Holy One with ALL that we have...yes, it means ALL that we are in heart, mind, body, and soul, and perhaps with ALL of our race and gender and self-expression... with all of our DNA. Anything that we would use to describe the whole of who we are—this is what we are to love God, the



Holy One, with. Love of the One who is EVERYTHING and ALL THINGS, requires loving with ALL of who we are and EVERYTHING and EVERY PART of ourselves that we identify with. If we connect to something and describe ourselves with that something—then *that* part of us is to be loving the Holy One, wholly and completely. No parts of us exists apart from loving God.

And of course, the other powerful part of this teaching Jesus gives is that he takes another verse from their shared tradition in Leviticus 19 (*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*) and links it with the teaching from Deuteronomy 6. Jesus pairs these two verses together so that a love that honors God with everything we have is not complete if it does not include love of neighbor. In other words, as Gafney said, *“We cannot love God enough to compensate for not loving our neighbor.”* I’ll say that again: *“We cannot love God enough to compensate for not loving our neighbor.”* Or as the scribe says later in the passage, we cannot love God with our worship and meditation and prayer and good intentions (aka: burnt offerings and sacrifices); ***we love God by loving our neighbor.***

Their land is our land, their pain is our pain, their joy is our joy, their thriving is our thriving, their hunger is our hunger, their thirst is our thirst, their need is our need, their suffering is our suffering. It is only in and through loving our neighbor, that is loving one another in community and in relationship (including loving our enemy as Jesus says elsewhere) that we are able to love God. God receives our love as we love our neighbor as ourselves (which also, includes loving ourselves by the way...another key part of relational love).

Loving our neighbor as ourselves allows us to begin to experience what God’s love looks like and feels like. It expands our understanding of God’s love. As Valarie Kaur says,

When one of us does something bad, we tend to attribute it to circumstance, but when one of “them” does the same, we attribute it to essence—Oh, that’s just how they are. We think of us as complex and multidimensional; we tend to think of “them” as simple and one-dimensional ... In other words, who we see as

one of us determines who we let inside our circle of care and concern...

[Of course,] No one should be forced to feel compassion for their oppressors. I have learned that we do not need to feel anything for our opponents at all in order to practice love. Love is labor that returns us to wonder—it is seeing another person's humanity, even if they deny their own. We just have to choose to wonder about them...

When we choose to wonder about people we don't know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of those we see as part of us. We prepare ourselves to love beyond what evolution requires.

Friends, Jesus calls us to a love beyond what self-preserving evolution requires. Jesus's call to love is for the thriving of ALL people, not just the surviving of some people.

As Jesus says later to the scribe as he repeats back to Jesus the greatest commandment to love God with all of oneself and to love one's neighbor as oneself,

*“You are not far from the kingdom of God,”* or another way to say this is, *“you are living within the realm of God's love and how God imagines and creates the world to be.”*

Jesus gives us a great gif there: Love is the “interpretive key” to everything in life and in faith. There were parts of his own scriptures that Jesus did not choose to harp on or teach or reiterate. He, like us, was selective in his choice of scripture. He made interpretive decisions and gives us permission to do the same. In this exchange with a scholar of scripture, he is essentially telling this scribe (and all of us who would follow as readers and hearers and interpreters of the scripture) that when we have an issue with something the Bible says or wonder if it is true or worth teaching or if something is contradictory or curious to us – Jesus is giving us permission to ask ourselves and one another: Is this belief or action or word helping us love God with all that we are – our FULL expression of ourselves (what we know in our minds/guts/hearts to be true from our full life experience) and if so, then good...AND ALSO...is this belief or action or word one that challenges us

to love others as their full selves—bring the fullness of who they are to the table—all their identities and complexities and needs and hopes and doubts and flaws? If so, then it's good and worth cultivating and laboring for. That's what matters.

Laboring in love is all about doing the work that allows us to love God fully as ourselves and love others fully as their selves.

So every word we speak and policy we endorse and action we take and person we see and every time we wonder what we should do in *this moment*...we can ask ourselves...what does loving God with all that I am look like in this moment...and does that also look like loving my neighbor not only with all that I am but also allowing them to live and be loved fully as *they* are? If anything about a word or choice or action “obstructs” or “shuts up” that love or compassion within us or within them – then we should refrain from speaking or acting or believing in that way.

If this sounds like a lot of work, it's because it is. Laboring in love is not a “one and done” situation. But it does become easier and more natural the more we do it. And just because we do it our whole lives long

does not mean there is not an ‘end’ in sight or in mind. The end is the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The result of laboring is new birth. But even then the labor doesn't stop; it just changes.

Ask any person who has carried a child within them and delivered that child, the laboring is hard, hard work, and yes, the physical labor of delivery ends when the child enters the world – and it's a beautiful thing. And then, the labor of raising that child begins. And then about 18 years later the labor of letting that child go begins. And then a few decades later the labor of allowing that child to care for you begins. The labor is ongoing and continual, but is always birthing a new season, a new possibility, and together we are all always laboring toward the creation of the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. And even when that day comes, I imagine that it will not be a frozen or static reality. It will be dynamic where the laboring in love continues and flows and just is part of who we are and how we move in relationships with one another.

I leave you with the words again, of Love Activist, Valarie Kaur:

Amen.

*“[Today,] Can you choose one person to practice wondering about? Can you listen to the story they have to tell? If your fists tighten, or your heart beats fast, or if shame rises to your face, it’s okay. Breathe through it. Trust that you can. The heart is a muscle: The more you use it, the stronger it becomes.”*

*“Revolutionary love” is the choice to enter into wonder and labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political and rooted in joy. Loving only ourselves is escapism; loving only our opponents is self-loathing; loving only others is ineffective. All three practices together make love revolutionary, and revolutionary love can only be practiced in community.”*

Laboring in love is our identity as Christ-followers. Love as clear, consistent, kind action. That is plain as day to those who are watching us.

Let’s not make this harder than it is!