

Reflection for July 17

By Laura Fohse

Today we're going to chat about love...
about God's love...

y'all know this is my favorite subject..
and since this is my last Sunday with you for awhile... I want to be sure I'm
leaving with this love thing fresh on your mind.

I know I've said it many times before and some of you may be tired of hearing
it...

but that's okay.

You can be tired of it...

that doesn't mean I'm gonna stop saying it.

Have you heard of the Rule of 7?

It's the belief that we need to read or hear something 7 times before we can
remember it.

Well Jesus had a 70 x 7 rule...

which I think is more accurate...

especially when it comes to a concept that is quite easy to understand...

but often quite difficult to truly remember –

and to truly embrace.

I don't think its possible to say it too many times.

God loves us.

Really really really loves us..

and we need to know that not only here...

intellectually... but in our whole being.

We need to fully embody... fully experience God...

right to the very depths of our soul we need to experience God's unbelievable
capacity to love.

I'm talking about not only understanding God's love... but also the power of
that love in our lives...

the power to transform all of who we think we are... into all of who God created us to be...
to transform whatever brokenness we may have in our lives into something beautiful.. a feeling of being okay – with ourselves and with the world around us.

God's love is here... for all of us...
and yet it doesn't seem to matter how many times we've heard that message...
most of us struggle to actually receive it...
there are just too many things that get in the way...
 too many doubts.. fears...
too many other messages that block the one message that really matters.

And God's love is so immense... so powerful..
it's so tender and so full of joy... that most of us have only ever felt the very tip of it.
We've underestimated it's power, it's passion.. and it's availability....
and at the same time, we've underestimated our ability to receive it.

Many of us have become so busy and hurried...
so sunk in the troubles and trivialities of life...
that we forget to do those things we need to do to experience the heart-to-heart intimacy with God's presence that God so wants for us.

We miss the joy that God's love can create in our lives...
the way it heals our broken places and pulls us toward wholeness... as individuals... and as community.

Instead, many of us carry with us a quiet longing... this deep hunger... for love.

I believe... without any doubt... that the deepest need of the human heart is to be loved...

 just as we are... for who we are.
And we all respond to this need in a lot of different ways.
Sometimes we try to be perfect in order to earn love.
Or we pretend that we don't need love...

we repress our need until all that remains is this sort of vague restlessness and yearning for... something.

In the scripture reading this morning... from Romans... Paul is telling us to stop denying ourselves what we most need...

he says, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..."

He's saying... don't listen to what the world tells you you need... cause the world is wrong.

That longing you're feeling... it isn't going to be filled by buying the best car... or owning the biggest house... or by being the smartest... or the most beautiful... or the richest.

I know this is what the world says... but the world is WRONG.

Now ignoring these messages is NOT going to be easy...

they are so much a part of our culture that sometimes we can't even recognize them for the lies they really are...

lies that tell you that you aren't good enough... that you will never be good enough.

But... Paul says... it is possible... we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds...

we must renew... refresh... revisit the way we think about things.

The way we see ourselves... and what we really know about the longing of our heart... a longing that can only be filled by opening ourselves to receive the love of God.

And when we do... when we are able to open ourselves... even just a little bit... we will then be able to... as it says in Romans....present our bodies as a living sacrifice... holy and acceptable to God.

We will be able to offer ourselves.. our whole selves... holy and acceptable.. as we are... to God.

Okay now... the second most important thing I think you can learn at church.... You are holy...

you are acceptable..

you are God's beloved.

So the first is that God loves you...
and the second is that you ARE worthy of that love!

Henri Nouwen... gave many lectures and wrote many books on being the beloved... In his book "Life of the Beloved" ... he says this:
"The greatest gift my friendship can give to you is the gift of your belovedness. I can give that gift only insofar as I have claimed it myself.
Isn't that what friendship is all about: giving to each other the gift of our belovedness?"

Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests."

It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: "You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless, you are despicable, you are nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite"

These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them.

That's the great trap.

It is the trap of self-rejection.

Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection.

Success, popularity, and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection.

Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "beloved".

Being the beloved expresses the core truth of our existence."

Nouwen goes on to say, "I am putting this so directly and so simply because, though the experience of being the beloved has never been completely absent from my life, I never claimed it as my core truth. I kept running around it in large or small circles, always looking for someone or something to convince me of my belovedness.

It was as if I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says, "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests" ... we are the beloved.

We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved... or wounded us.

That's the truth of our lives.

That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, "You are my Beloved".

Every time you listen with great attentiveness to that voice that calls you the beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply.

It is like discovering a well in the desert. Once you have touched wet ground, you want to dig deeper.

From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are."

End quote.

and so we know....

that God loves us

and that we are worthy of that love.

and the third most important thing we can learn at church.... is this:

that God's love... and our worthiness of that love.... are most clear within the context of community.

Romans tells us that "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

People need community...

Over the years I have learned a lot about the importance of creating safe community...

Community where we can share together in God's love...

where together we can seek ways to open ourselves to it's vastness.. to its power....

Community... where our belovedness is affirmed... and where we can be a reflection of the belovedness of others....

where we can speak with passion...

where a circle of hands will open to receive us...

eyes will light up as we enter the room...

voices will celebrate with us... grief with us....
inspire us... challenge us.

Community means strength... strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

people coming together... probably even more enthusiastically than we did in singing our song earlier...

people coming together to experience.. to reflect... and to live God's love.

I found this quote from Scott Peck really spoke to me about my ideal for community.

He says, "community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you.

Instead, the members accept you as you are.

You are free to be you.

And being so free, you are free to discard defenses, masks, disguises; free to seek your own psychological and spiritual health; free to become your whole and holy self."

We... all of us here... are part of a community that is the body of Christ and as Paul says.. "we all have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us".

All of us have special talents to offer community... but... above all that... the greatest gift you can give... is you.

Your real gift is not so much what you can do... but who you are.

The real question isn't "what can we offer each other?" but rather, "who can we be for each other?"

It's important.. I think... to make a distinction between talents and gifts.

More important than our talents... are our gifts. We have only a few talents.. and some of us more than others... but we all have many gifts.

Our gifts are the ways we express who we are... to express our humanity.

They are friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, love, hope, trust and many others.

These are the true gifts we have to offer each other.

Our greatest gift... is our very lives... holy and acceptable..

offered... to a God who loves us absolutely...
and to one another
and in so doing.. in offering ourselves to one another... we become together a
true community of love....
one body...
beloved and blessed.
Ready to share our belovedness and our blessings with the world..
as Jesus instructed us to do.
Thanks be to God.