

Interactive lesson



picture from personal creation

Two weeks ago, I asked folks to put valentines to God into the offering plate. Here are our love notes to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. <[Read the notes](#)>

What would you say are some valentines that God has given you lately? <[Let them respond](#)>

Let us give thanks to God for the love shared constantly with us in eternal covenant through Jesus Christ.

Gospel lesson

In the Gospel of Luke prior to today's reading, Jesus had performed some healing miracles and gotten into arguments with the scribes and Pharisees about the intent behind law of God. He then went up a mountain to pray for a night, after which he named the twelve apostles out of the many disciples following Him.

That brings us to:



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/lumo-birds-flowers/>

Luke 6:17-26

(NRSV)

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you

will mourn and weep.

²⁶ "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" UMH #557>

Message: The First Fruits



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/come-home-for-christmas/second-sunday-after-christmas-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-after-christmas-year-c-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Source of all love, as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may make good use of the gifts You give us and cherish others doing likewise. Amen.



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/love-never-ends-being-the-body-of-christ/sixth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/sixth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-c-graphics>

The United Methodist Discipleship Ministries series focuses on "The First Fruits" today:

“Jesus is the model of living and loving and dying and rising. And while we may not really know what happens at that threshold moment between this life and eternity, we embrace the promise and the hope wholeheartedly.”



picture from family photo

In the months before she died, my mother told me several times in our phone calls that she was not afraid of dying. She was not trying to hurry it, but she was at peace with moving on. A couple of times she even reported having heard her mother calling to her in the night, a call of welcoming love.

She knew, in the core of her being, that death would not be the end, that she had the promise of life eternal away from her failing body. As Christians, we should all know this, because of Jesus.

Not everybody knows it, though. We see people in the world today who are spiritually adrift, who have no hope, who feel depressed, lost, and alone. And this is nothing new.



picture cropped from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewish National Fund trees in The Negev.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewish_National_Fund_trees_in_The_Negev.jpg)
credit: David Shankbone

In the Old Testament, we hear about those who do not trust in the Lord. They lived in a spiritual drought, bearing no fruit and being driven like chaff when winds of trouble blew.

Yet the Lord was with the people. Those who trusted in God received spiritual nourishment and prospered, like trees with roots by a stream that bear fruit even during drought. It was a Jewish tradition that people were rewarded for faith in God and punished for sin – and being human, that tradition came to be understood in a materialistic way.

When Jesus came to the people, He addressed their physical needs as well as their spiritual. Like the emergency squad call where, in resolving the patient's difficulty breathing, I enabled her to realize her hunger, Jesus resolved the people's immediate woes so that they could feel their hunger for a better relationship with God – for a fulfillment of the covenant.

He went on to remind all the people that life is not about material gains or comforts:

- † Poor? Do not worry, you belong to the kingdom of God, who provides for all.
- † Hungry? Jesus came to feed you the bread of life.
- † Ridiculed by materialists? You have so much better awaiting you in heaven than they can imagine!
- † Comfortable relying on materialism and your own abilities? You need God far more than you need any “stuff” or can supply for yourself, and you are not going to be happy when you finally realize that!

The covenant was never about people working to earn rewards or punishments from God. God created the covenant to nurture people in love, to help us grow in healthy relationships with our Lord and with one another. Change will happen, and we need to love and trust God to guide us through it.



picture from personal photo

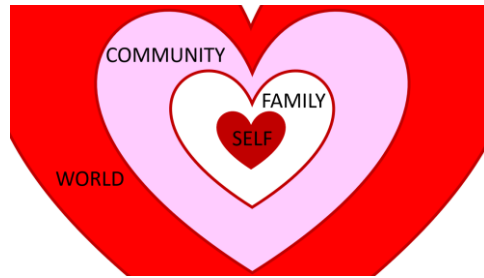
Think of trees that bear fruit. First, they grow beautiful blossoms. Different things happen to those blossoms to enable pollination of the flowers - wind, insects, animals that brush against them. Once pollinated, the beauty of the blossom fades and the flower dies so that the fruit may grow.

We go through a lot of experiences in life. They shape our souls, some in profoundly beautiful ways. When change comes (as it inevitably will), we take time to mourn the loss; and also in time, we learn to cherish the memories and build upon them as we live into the new. We are growing fruit.

After Jesus died, He rose from the dead, the first fruit people saw after the blossom of life had fallen away. Part of the point of the resurrection was to show us that God has plans for us beyond this life. While materialists may see death as a tragic end, it is actually an important step in our development.

In Jesus's day, there was heated debate in the Temple about whether there was any resurrection of the dead; Jesus pointedly told the Sadducees that there was. And yet, the debate carried over into the new church (which drew many members from local synagogues).

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, after working through interpersonal issues, he addressed the fundamental faith. He basically said that to believe in Christ required accepting resurrection is real. More than behaving well, more than treating one another well, more than following rituals, more than having gifts, even more than loving one another, we need to fully accept and trust God.



picture from personal creation

Knowing the truth in Jesus enables us to be renewed and united in love at many levels.

- † Self – knowing our own value enables valuing others
- † Family – the security of unconditional bonds enables us to look beyond ourselves
- † Community – expanding love into covenants beyond our immediate house enables better society
- † World – sharing God’s love with all whom we can, unconditionally striving for the benefit of all, brings agape to fruition: God’s kingdom manifest upon this earth

OK, so it is a little unrealistic to change the entire world immediately – people have to make their own decisions, after all. But we can change something in our own lives. The valentines shared earlier were beautiful; how about now we live them more fully?

Think about new ways to share God’s love. What fruit can you bear – or become – based on the relationships you already have? What new relationships might you pursue, to expand your understanding and to grow more love in this world? Pray about it, then reach out.

After all, this world is hungry, too much of it near starving, for ripe agape fruit from God. Help all to realize their hunger and to reach out to Jesus for fulfillment!

<Doxology>

<Offertory / Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

Loving God, we have been blessed with so much through your goodness.

As we bring our gifts in gratitude this morning, you remind us that it doesn't matter what we have in our lives, if we do not have love, we have nothing.

This love is not the love of Valentine's Day cards, and not even the love we feel among families, which are both rich blessings.

You long for us to experience agape love - the love of the world, the love for those we don't even know. Open our eyes and our hearts.

- Lord, please help {these members of the body of Christ whom we lift up} with Your healing touch and comfort:

➤ Family of Richard P. Lapuszynski - died Feb 4

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- Thanks for
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- Hold those who cannot be with us in Your loving embrace until we see them again.
 - Family far off
 - Travelers
- Send Your Spirit to address world/social problems
 - end bigotry, dismantle racism, reform systems persist
 - bring world peace
- Guide our Leaders - local, state, federal, international, and especially of Your church.

All these things we pray as You taught us to pray,
<Lord's Prayer>



picture from personal creation

COVENANT OF LOVE

Carl Johnson & Janet Macko

I now invite Carl Johnson and Janet Macko forward, that being gathered together in the sight of God, we may witness and bless their joining together in a Christian covenant of love.

<SLIDE CHANGE>

SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:7-21

- ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
- ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.
- ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.
- ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.
- ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.
- ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.
- ¹⁶ 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.
- ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.
- ¹⁸ 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.
- ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.
- ²⁰ 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.

²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who
love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

PRAYER

God of all peoples, you are the true light illuminating everyone.

You show us the way, the truth, and the life.

You love us even when we are disobedient.

You sustain us with your Holy Spirit.

We rejoice in your life in the midst of our lives.

We praise you for your presence with us,
and especially in this act of solemn covenant.

Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all life,

Author of salvation, Giver of all grace:

**Bless and sanctify with your Holy Spirit Carl and Janet,
who come now to join in covenant.**

**Grant that they may give their commitments to each other
in the strength of your steadfast love.**

**Enable them to grow in love and peace with you
and with one another all their days,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen.



picture from
[https://www.pexels.com/
photo/macro-shot-of-heart-
shaped-cut-out-1820511/](https://www.pexels.com/photo/macro-shot-of-heart-shaped-cut-out-1820511/)

EXCHANGE OF COMMITMENTS

Carl and Janet have defined covenant as “A Sacred agreement
respecting and protecting the Sacred being of another.”

Hear now their declarations to one another:

I, **Carl**, covenant to love and care for Janet Macko by:

1. Supporting and respecting the dignity and worth of the opinions and feelings of Janet
2. Standing with and beside Janet in both good times and difficult times in health, finances, shelter, and independence
3. Encouraging Janet to continue her growth and understanding of Spirit and truth
4. Working with Janet to become a partner in making our home a place of warmth and welcoming
5. Recreating in such a way that laughter and good humor will be shared within and beyond the walls of our home
6. Continuing to grow in Biblical and Spiritual life through study, prayer, worship, and service
7. Remaining faithful in mind, body, and soul

I, **Janet**, covenant to love, honor, and respect Carl as long as we both shall live:

1. To thank God each and every day and to praise Him for the many blessings that we both enjoyed in our marriages, that ultimately brought us together following the loss of our long-term spouses
2. To share with Carl those spiritual awarenesses that have brought us to this time in our lives
3. To continue to grow spiritually with Carl through study and worship
4. To remain open and engaged with Carl's special and long-term experience as a pastor to the many people who value his counsel and friendship
5. To always be faithful to his feelings, his health, his concerns, and his knowledge of the scriptures

6. To share with Carl the joys and concerns that [come with] old age and all of the changes that are inevitable, until death do us part
7. To always honor the love that exists between Carl and his three children and myself and my seven children, and the ties that will bind us as a blended family

You have declared your commitments before God and this congregation.

May God confirm your covenant and fill you both with grace.

<SLIDE CHANGE>

RESPONSE OF THE FAMILIES AND PEOPLE

This covenant unites their families and life communities.

Will all of you, by God's grace, do everything in your power to uphold and care for these two persons in their covenant?

We will. We rejoice in your union, and pray God's blessing upon you.

These whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Amen.



picture from MMMS collection

BLESSING PRAYER

O God,

consecrate this covenant of love

that in it is represented

the covenant between Christ and his Church.

Send your blessing upon Carl and Janet,
that they may steadfastly keep their commitments,
and so grow in love and godliness together that
their home may be a haven of blessing and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

I present to you Carl and Janet, united in love.
As they return to their seats, let us sing our
closing hymn.

<Hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” UMH #89>

<Benediction>



background picture from
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/Love-never-ends-being-the-body-of-christ/sixth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/sixth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-c-graphics>

Go now in peace,
sharing the gifts with which God has blessed you.
Build relationships based on Christ’s love,
creating community in the Holy Spirit.
Thus make the world better for you and all whom you
encounter, for the glory of God.
Amen.