

# STAYIN' ALIVE

Spirit of God: Loving God

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Jeff Marian

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We're in a worship series entitled "Stayin' Alive," exploring what it means to be alive with the Spirit of God. And not just alive for the sake of being alive, but alive for the mission God has given us as the Body of Christ to make God's peace and justice, hope and wholeness a growing reality in this broken world.

Here's a question: how can you tell when the Spirit of God is at work in the world? The answer is: Love. When the Spirit of God is at work, hearts are drawn to love more deeply. Jesus came into the world to reveal the depth of God's love for us, and that love compels us to love God and our neighbor. Today, I want us to think together about what it means to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength.

It can be hard to wrap your head around the notion of loving God, let alone wrap your heart around it, if for no other reason than that we can't see God. But that's why Jesus is so important to our faith. Some of us have inherited some pretty warped images of God as an angry, judgmental, bearded white guy who just loves to punish people. But that's not the God who is revealed in Jesus. The Bible says that the fullness of God dwelled in Jesus. In other words, if you want to know what God is like, look to the Jesus revealed in the Gospels. And if you do, you'll see a God of infinite love who is willing to give himself away for all people, especially those who are least deserving. That is a God worthy of our love!

I want to suggest to you today that loving God isn't all that different from loving another person. And it starts with a desire to move closer to that person. When we love someone, we long to be close to them. When Nancy and I first started dating, I would make up reasons to be close to her. After 33 years of marriage I don't have to make up reasons, but I still want to be close to her.

When it comes to our relationship with God, getting closer to God includes worshipping God with our whole heart, and becoming more aware of God's presence in daily life. If we don't expect to "see" God throughout our day, we'll often miss God. And so we begin this morning with a Call to Worship, inviting us to draw closer to God through this time of worship. Not because we have to, but because we want to. Because the love of God compels us to love God right back!

Love begins by wanting to be close. It continues with appreciation, a deep appreciation for the one we love. One of our less attractive traits as human beings is our tendency to take people for granted. We just assume they'll always be there for us and so they simply become part of the scenery of life. Have you ever had the experience of nearly losing someone you've come to take for granted? Suddenly you're reminded just how much they mean to you, and how much you appreciate them.

The same thing can happen in our relationships with God. Because God promises to be with us always, we can begin to take God for granted. But just pause for a moment and consider all that God has done for you, and all that God promises to do. Now, listen to a few of the promises of God in Scripture and let these promises stir in you a deeper love and appreciation for the One who gives us all good things:

*Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand. – Isaiah 41:10*

*If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land. – 2 Chronicles 7:14*

*"For the mountains may move and the hills disappear, but even then my faithful love for you will remain. My covenant of blessing will never be broken," says the Lord, who has mercy on you. – Isaiah 54:10*

*Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me.... When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. – John 14:1, 3*

Let's express our love for God by giving thanks to God for all that God has done, and all that God promises to do.

Loving God begins by wanting to be close to God. It continues when we appreciate God for all that God has done for us, and promises to do. And then our love grows as we learn to cultivate honor and respect for God – not just gratitude for what God does but respect and honor for who God is, for God's character. We get to know God's character through Scripture, especially as it's revealed in Jesus. When we open Scripture to learn about the character of God, what do we find? We discover that God is:

- Loving
- Just
- Good
- Faithful
- Present
- Generous
- Forgiving
- Merciful
- Eternal
- Holy

How amazing to think that this God, this amazing God, would choose to create us and love us! How can we not love God in return? How can we not cultivate honor and respect for this God who is good beyond our comprehension?

And that's why, when we fail to love and honor God, when our love and faith and appreciation grow cold, we apologize. That's what we do when we wound the heart of one that we love. We say that we're sorry. And in relationship to God we call that confession. So, let's honor and respect God by moving now into a time of confession, expressing to God our sorrow for wounding God's heart....

For over 30 years I have dragged my wife, Nancy, all over the Midwest in pursuit of my dream to serve in the congregations to which I've felt called. There were times she didn't want to move, times when she didn't want to uproot our children and start all over again. But each time she moved with me. Because when we love someone, we support their dreams.

One of Nancy's dreams has been to live on the water, and recently a house that we could actually afford came on the market just a couple of miles from where we currently live. She asked me if I'd be willing to

consider it and I immediately thought to myself, "At last, I have an opportunity to help make one of her dreams come true." Why? Because I love my wife, and when we love someone we support their dreams. We'll be moving later this week!

When we love God, we support God's dreams. And God's dream is called The Kingdom of God. It's a world in which all people have what they need to thrive. A world where love conquers hate, hope replaces despair and peace prevails. And when we love God we commit our lives to supporting God's dream, even when it's hard, even when it requires sacrifice. Because when we love someone we support their dreams.

Today we're breaking ground on the future of this ministry. But we're not doing it simply to have a nice place to call Prince of Peace. We're building a place where God and God's people can meet together, grow in love, and then share that love with the world. UP, IN & OUT. That's the life of discipleship that Jesus calls us to. Many have made sacrificial gifts to make this dream a reality, because that is what love calls us to do.

So today, let's not just break ground. Let's allow God to break our hearts, to break our hearts for the very things that break God's heart – hopelessness, injustice, hunger, despair, fear and brokenness. Let's allow God to break our hearts open not just to receive God's love, but to share that love with a world in need by sharing our faith with others in word and in deed. Let's break this ground to build a place for God and God's people to grow in love, a place where God's dream for all people might become a reality. Let's do it because we love the One who first loved us.