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Extraordinary Love

John 15:9-13

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There is something that propels me to see a beautiful sunset or moonrise...I think it's because one of the ways I feel the extraordinary love of God is through creation. I cannot tell you how many times I have jumped into my car or just gone outside to chase a sunset or a moonrise. I am always trying to capture the perfect picture, to remember how I feel so loved by God in this way. But a photo never is able to fully contain the beauty of this powerful moment in creation.

Just like trying to capture a picture of a sunset, the love of God is also difficult to fully capture. God's love seems so "out of this world" so beyond what I can see and so beyond how I love. Have you ever felt that way about God's love? Does it seem so far beyond you that it is difficult to accept? Well, for the next few moments I want us to imagine how we can best position ourselves in such a way to experience and receive this amazing gift of God's extraordinary love.

One of the primary ways to know and to experience God's love is to see how Jesus loved. Today in John's gospel we will focus on Jesus' words in chapter 15 about how Jesus demonstrated his great love for his disciples. This kind of love is a perfect reflection of how God loved Jesus. And Jesus is encouraging the disciples to experience a new way of loving others. And more importantly, a new way to receive love from God. This new way invites the disciples, and us, to remain in God's love and position ourselves to be present, to better experience God's extraordinary love.

When you do a google search for "extraordinary love" do you know what comes up? Yep, romantic love stories. It's the kind of love you see in a good Hallmark movie. I know some people really enjoy a good love story, while others would rather do anything except watch a mushy love story because they all end the same way...happily ever after. But reality is not always like a Hallmark movie. Actually, extraordinary love can be experienced in ways that include unspeakable pain as well as incredible

happiness. While there are some wonderful aspects about love in those Hallmark movies, I hope we can grow in awareness of how we experience God's love in a way that is beyond what we see in those movies.

In John 15, we learn from Jesus that he loves everyone in the same way God loved him. Jesus was lovingly present with his followers, and God's love flowed naturally from Jesus to all he encountered. Sometimes Jesus' love was filled with compassion, and other times Jesus' love was filled with instruction and even a rebuke. Here is what we know and can see in how Jesus loved...it was a love that cannot be produced solely of ourselves. Extraordinary love is a result of God with us and positioning ourselves to be with God.

In today's scripture passage we are witnessing a part of a conversation Jesus is having with his followers who he has been with over the last 3 years. The stakes were high because they knew Jesus' life was being threatened. Jesus told them he would be leaving them soon, so he was giving some of his final words to his disciples. They were gathered in an upper room, it was evening, the candles were flickering, and they were about to celebrate the Passover Meal together. This was a very important meal...a religious ritual reminding them of God's love for God's people. Jesus loving presence in that moment transformed them and allowed them to begin to see God's perfect love. So, as we read this passage, John 15:9-13, listen for any words or phrases that stand out to you, or any images that come to your mind, as a personal way of hearing from God.

Jesus said, "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Jesus says he loves us as God loves him...One of the questions I had is how does God love Jesus? Let's consider how God loves Jesus.

God is and has always been present with Jesus... John 1:1 says *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."* Scholars have widely interpreted The Word as referring to Jesus. So, God is and has always been present WITH Jesus. And the very name of Jesus, Immanuel means, God WITH us. God sent Jesus into the world as a baby...not in easy circumstances, but WITH willing, loving, Godly earthly parents, Mary and Joseph. Jesus was born in a stable where it was cold, dark, dirty. God came to be WITH us, as one of us.

German Jesuit Karl Rahner reflected on the incarnation of Jesus saying, "God has come. God is here in the world. When we celebrate Christmas, we mean that God has spoken into the world God's last, God's deepest, and most beautiful word in the incarnate Word...And this word means: I love you, you, the world."

God loving Jesus didn't mean things were easy. But the apostle Paul reminds us of God's constant love in Romans 8:38, *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from God's love. This is such a powerful reminder to all of us. But oftentimes, I am aware that I put conditions on myself as to whether I am deserving of love. I actually separate myself from this extraordinary love. But God doesn't separate us from God's love. We are the ones who separate ourselves from receiving God's love by making it conditional. For example, I may believe I will only receive God's love if I'm loving or good enough. This creates a real problem for us because in that moment we become the primary focus instead of God.

The truth of scripture is that God's extraordinary love is given freely and unconditionally, without anyone needing to be loving or good. It makes sense that we become the focus because Jesus

instructs his followers to love in a way that WE 'lay down our life for others'. But what I believe Jesus is teaching is that extraordinary love flows naturally from being in relationship with him. Keeping God's commandments, having joy that overflows and putting our agenda aside to be with another are all ways God's love flows. It's not that we seek to keep commandments first or determine we will be joyful or decide our goal is to help others. No, it's that these are possible ways God's extraordinary love becomes visible. We will miss this truth if we make ourselves the focus. When we position ourselves with God and acknowledge God is and always has been and will be with us, then we are the vessel from which God's love naturally flows.

Every single day God gives us a powerful reminder of a sunset and moonrise that is absolutely extraordinary. Sometimes I miss it if I don't position myself to see it. Even if it is not able to be seen because of weather or my schedule, I can remind myself of the truth that the sun always sets and this is one of the ways I can experience God's extraordinary love at the end of the day. When I am intentional, I can create a way for me to look for God's love at the close of each day. Maybe sharing with someone how I've experienced a way God has demonstrated love through a word of affirmation, a loving touch, an act of service, quality time with someone, or the gift of something like seeing a sunset.

I have a friend that shares with me a few things she is grateful for every day, and I share what I am grateful for that day. What if we were to be intentional about sharing with someone how we have experienced God's love each day? You may think of someone you want to begin to share this with each day and start today. Think about feeling loved in an extraordinary way. Doesn't it all come down to someone being WITH us, not over and above, or below us, but WITH us.

Recently I met with a group of therapists who I have been meeting with for several years. I have positioned myself in this type of group to practice giving compassion to myself and others by receiving the compassion God has placed within us. The leaders of the group instructed us to listen to one another and respond as if we were their soul reflecting back what we felt and heard.

Initially I had no idea what this meant. But what happened after the sharing, the listener said something like, "I feel sad when you say how hard you are on yourself; or, when you said you felt like you were drowning, I felt afraid." There was an experience of being with one another...no advice or judgement. No one was superior to another, there was no evaluating of the other. Neither was anyone passively just going along to get along, not being their authentic self. We were simply being present to one another... a beautiful experience of extraordinary love.

I wonder if we could better experience God's loving presence if we positioned ourselves to be present with God, others, and ourselves...not in a way that we are superior to anyone or thinking of ourselves as beneath anyone...but WITH one another? Just as Jesus was and continues to be with us by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is Immanuel, God with us.

There are as many examples of God's love as there are individual fingerprints. Just like a beautiful sunset or moon rise, each one different, each one a gift from our Creator. One such example was written by one of my favorite authors, Sarah Bessey. I want to invite us now to take a moment to reflect on these reminders of God's extraordinary love WITH us.

Excerpt from 'A REMINDER' by Sarah Bessey
"You don't have to be productive and you don't have to change the world. You're already so loved. Your family story can be beautiful or terrible — or, like most of us, a bit of both.

You don't have to be a mother or a father, you don't have to be married, you don't have to be single, you don't have to want children or raise children. You don't have to be sober or clean. You don't have to give away everything you own and take a vow of poverty, you don't have to be prosperous either.

You can carry chronic pain or dance through life.

You can be introverted or extroverted.

You don't have to love yourself or even like yourself, you are loved.

You have nothing to prove. You have nothing to earn.

Love has happened and it is happening and it will happen. It is kind and patient towards you.

You're already so loved, you aren't earning a breath of love or tenderness more than what you already have just by breathing — just by existing, just by being here in the wonder.

You may feel it or not.

You are so loved."

Just like I have chased after sunsets and moon rises, we often chase after or try to control the love of God because we fear we may miss it, as if it will pass us by. It's simply not possible for the God of love to ever pass us by, or for us to be in control of God's love. God's love is as present WITH us as is our breath. Just as we always have our breath, we may be less aware of it until someone suggests we take a deep breath. Breathe it in, allow yourself to be present or enveloped by God's love today and each day. May we continue to position ourselves to best experience God's extraordinary love, feel God's embrace and be reminded that God says we are God's beloved.

Will you join me in prayer...

God with us, you say we are loved, and we are so thankful that in your loving presence we are held, we are enough, and your love flows. We pray that all of us would position ourselves with you so that your extraordinary love naturally flows throughout all creation to bring your will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen