

# Epiphanies of God's Love: It Transforms Us

## Sermon 133 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 27, 2022

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-13

I have a little confession to make this morning. It comes on the heels of last week's sermon during which I revealed my back-seat-of-the-bus-music-listening behaviors from 25 years ago. You all handled the news well, but I heard about it in just about every committee meeting I attended. You were gracious, though, so I feel like I can trust you with this next thing.

Here it is, don't judge me: I really like to watch reality TV.

I have been a sucker for it as long as I can remember. When MTV aired *The Real World* and *Road Rules* I would watch as long as my parents allowed. As an adult I struggle to stay awake for a critically acclaimed movie or what other adults would call good acting. But plant me in front of a good DIY home makeover or cooking show (yes, I'm talking about you: *Great British Baking Show*) and I can stay awake long into the night.

My favorites though (and here's where I am depending on your non-judgment) are the shows where people fall in love. There, I said it. *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* franchise has had me hooked for oh, almost all of its 26 seasons. I still look forward to Monday nights when the new episodes air and I fill up my bowl of popcorn and settle in to see what kind of drama is going to unfold. It is one of my favorite nights of the week.

But there's another show now, a new experiment of love that shows on Netflix, and it has me hooked (again, we are not judging).

*Love is Blind* – now in its 2<sup>nd</sup> season – explores the question of whether or not romantic love can develop outside of any physical attraction. The experiment takes place in a closed environment. The participants have no connection to the outside world: no phones, no devices, no access to their "regular lives." They spend the first 10 days visiting potential partners in "pods" which are single rooms connected by a wall. Each person is in a room alone that shares a wall with one other pod. In the pods, two strangers can talk to one another about anything and everything. Each person is in control of their own meet-ups and so they can decide who they want to talk to and for how long. Eventually, through a process of self-selection, pairs develop and people fall in love. Then, proposals happen! And once a couple is engaged, then and only then, are they allowed to see one another at what the show calls a "reveal".

After the ten day period in the pods, the engaged couples are whisked away to enjoy a vacation at a resort, before getting back to their "regular life" together. If all goes well, after just 6 weeks of knowing one another, the couples get married!

I know it seems crazy. Very few participants make it all the way to the altar, but it makes for some very interesting TV!

As you can imagine, once the couples leave the constructed comfort of the pods, see one another, and begin sharing real experiences of life together, trouble starts to seep in and disrupt their new relationships. First they navigate superficial thoughts and reactions to actually seeing one another. Then they have to deal with the flaws of their partners – because we all have flaws! But the real trouble pops

up in the last phase of the experiment when the couples are back to home, work, and play, surrounded by friends and family who have known each individual the longest. This is when things get rough.

One partner sees the other's apartment and realizes their beloved is actually a slob – or a neat freak. (Which is terrifying in both cases, no matter which one you most identify with.)

One partner's friends can't get on board with the fact that their friend who was the life of every party when he was single, is now paired up with an introvert who just doesn't want to go out on the town every night of the week.

The arguments begin to happen as suddenly two people who seemed to have everything in common realize that when they are mad, or sad, or scared, they can't communicate effectively and now they've got a real problem on their hands. How will they make it work?

This is the real breaking point for some couples as they realize that if the relationship is ever going to work, Each person is going to have to change something. Nobody gets to avoid it.

As I have been watching the show this season I have begun to realize that this is exactly where all kinds of relationships go wrong. And it isn't only our human relationships that we share with one another, this is also where we tend to back down, to get defensive, and retract in our relationship with God.

Just think about our epiphany journey, exploring the nature of God's love. First we were reminded that God cares for us, then that God's love for us (and all creation, really) never runs out. All of that sounds great! Then we are invited to go deeper... to participate in God's love. This feels like the next level, not only are we recipients of God's abundant love and care for us, but now we can actively share in its expression in our world. That is a lot of responsibility!

Then last week we talked about how God's love can raise the dead. Of course we know this to be true in the work of the cross, and it sure is good to know that God's love can raise all the stuff that is dead or dying within us. But when we get right down to it, if we want to be transformed from death into life (now and for all eternity), we have to allow God to work on us, to shape us and mold us, to make us into what Paul calls a new creation.

We have to allow God to change us. To change our behaviors and our beliefs about the world.  
To change the nature of our relationships with our friends and our enemies.  
To change the way we do business and the way we engage in the public sector.  
We have to allow God to see it all: the good, the bad, and the ugly.  
And as we open our whole selves to God – if we really are in relationship with God, then we have to humbly and vulnerably allow God to transform us. We have to change.

There is personal change that needs to happen. We talk about this with our language of repentance. When we decide to follow Jesus, we turn away from the things that are contrary to the Gospel. Things like greed, selfishness, and deceit, things that prioritize our own well-being over the inclusion and love of others. When we repent, to use the old baptismal language, we die to ourselves and rise to life in Christ.

There is also another dimension to the transformation that God's love beckons us to make: let's call it incarnational or relational change. If that first change is entry-level, easy stuff (like falling in love in a pod), then this is where things get real. (This is hometown week, when friends, family, and all the daily rhythms of work and play come flowing back in.)

If Jesus's life is the supreme example of God's love then we cannot ignore the fact that God transformed God's own self to be with us in our human form. Emmanuel, God with us. This is stated in Philippians 2:

though he was in the form of God...  
he emptied himself...  
being born in human likeness...  
And being found in human form he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.

It is lived out in the mission and ministry of Jesus as he enters into transformative relationships with people all over Galilee. Jesus teaches humanity about what God's love looks like – not just in word, but in action, in dynamic, transformative relationships with real people. In Jesus there is a back and forth, an exchange of ideas, a mutual vulnerability, an empathy, and a holy understanding that each and every one is made in the image of God and is therefore worthy of love, compassion, hospitality, and kindness.

All of this, of course, is contrary to what our minds are programmed to understand. When we look at the world we see difference, division, and competition. We have bought into the lie that there isn't enough, and so we store up resources for ourselves and we seek power and status that we can pass along only to our own. We believe that we can be absolutely right about everything based on our own research and from our places of certainty we label and judge others as ignorant, immoral, and unworthy. All the while we are building walls and shutting down the possibility that God may be trying to teach us something new through the eyes of an other. That God may be trying to transform us through the power of relationship... offering us a different glimpse of God's Kingdom through the eyes of a stranger, a neighbor, a friend...

This is what incarnational change is all about. It is about being *with* others and not just "for" others – which (of course) assumes that we have all the answers, all the wisdom, all the power. Incarnational change is utterly relational and it requires that we examine ourselves, our quirks, our blinders, and our shortcomings to allow room for God's love to grow within us.

Nobody ever said it would be easy.

This is what Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthian church:

When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom...  
... I came to you in weakness...  
with a demonstration of the Spirit.

He didn't come preaching, he came loving. And the love that Paul demonstrated with this group of early Christians was one that transcended the ways of the world because it insisted on the wisdom of the Spirit - a wisdom rooted in God's incarnational love, shown in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

A dear friend of mine who is Pastor of First Baptist Church on Fifth Street in Winston Salem wrote a similar letter this past Thursday when so many of us were waking up to news of war and hatred playing out in ways we had never imagined we would see in our lifetime. Her words echo Paul's as she reminds us all of what Incarnational Love looks like here and now. Listen to what she says:

Some beloved friends of mine are going through a profound season of suffering. When I hold them in love, I find my mind wants to protect itself. "I cannot imagine what this must be like for them," I often think, eager to fill my thoughts with anything but that pain.

And then I press my mind to connect with my heart and acknowledge wisdom I heard long ago.

"You must imagine it," I tell myself. You must. You must sit with this particular suffering, look it squarely in the face, and imagine every contour of it: the fear that has ripped them open wide, the utter exhaustion that is their constant companion, the road and hallways and paths they are walking, unsure what the shadowy future ahead will hold. You must feel the churn in your belly, the catch in your throat, the surrounding embrace of God that holds despite it all.

Facing the suffering of my friends is enlarging my compassion. It is knitting me to them and to the beloved community surrounding them in love.

Suffering with them, like suffering with others in different seasons of my life, has become a necessary teacher to me of the way of Love.

It pulls me out of the recesses of my own head (praise be), and lifts my eyes from my own life to bear witness to theirs.

I share this today, because I wonder if you're like me and need a grounding practice as again, we hear news of such disorientation and depravity in the world.

Today, I'm imagining the citizens of Ukraine and of Russia, and the political and humanitarian leaders responding to this global crisis.

I'm imagining the parents of trans and non-binary kids and the kids themselves, particularly in Texas, but beloveds all around so close in my heart.

I'm imagining those grieving the ravages of covid in our bodies and our relationships.

I'm imagining so many of us who are languishing and weary from persistent trauma.

And as I do, I'm looking squarely into the suffering, feeling the churn in my belly and the catch in my throat, the fear and the exhaustion so complete.

Somehow over time, in the heaviness and the grief, our compassion grows.

Our love widens.

Our resentment gives way to gentleness.

Our self-focus shifts to communal generosity.

Our tendency to numb turns to possibilities to embrace.

Suffering with saves us, over and over again.

For there, hope presses through the dark, hard, cold ground like shoots growing from stumps and new life arriving in the very places where death tries to have the final word.

The forces of death are all around.

They are growing amid our public conversations as we continue to marginalize people whose stories we neither know nor understand.

They are growing worldwide as countries wage war over land, resources, pride, and greed.  
They are growing within us as we close ourselves down because the opening up is too painful or requires too much change.

But friends, I think Emily and the Apostle Paul are right.

Somehow in the sharing of our grief,  
- In the sharing of the cross -  
Our compassion grows.

Somehow

Our love widens.  
Our resentment gives way to gentleness.  
Our self-focus shifts to communal generosity.  
Our tendency to numb turns to possibilities to embrace.

Somehow

Suffering with saves us, over and over again.  
For there, hope presses through the dark, hard, cold ground like shoots growing from stumps  
and new life arriving in the very places where  
death tries to have the final word.

Somehow Love transforms us.