

July 12, 2020
Farmville Baptist Church
Risk Love
Gal. 5:22-23
1Cor. 13, Matthew 5:43-47
Tracy Hartman

This morning we are digging into the first quality in the Fruit of the Spirit. Love.

We'll ask ourselves the question, "What does it mean to risk love?" Last week I challenged us to pay attention when we got prickly, because it would be an indication of where we might have some weeding to do, where we might have to root something out to make room for the fruit to grow that God wants to plant. Well, I got prickly this week as I worked on today's message, so I confess I am preaching to myself this morning. Feel free to listen in if you like.

I think it is significant that the list of the fruit of the spirit begins with Love, don't you? First Corinthians tells us that faith hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is what? Love. We could embody every other quality in the list, but if we embody them without love, Paul tells us, we are nothing so that we are like a clanging symbol or a jarring gong. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends. That has given me great hope and comfort this week. Love bears all things, hope all things, and endures all things, love never ends.

Most of us enact love all of the time so it has been a great joy to me to see how this family of faith cares for each other so deeply and consistently. Most of the time it's easy and even a joy for us to do that. But sometimes we find ourselves in a position where risking love will cost us something.

Back during the Vietnam war, mortar rounds landed in an orphanage run by missionaries in a small Vietnamese village. The missionaries and one of the children were killed, and several more children were injured. An eight year old girl was critically wounded.

After people in a neighboring village radioed for help, an American Navy doctor and nurse arrived with only their medical kits. They quickly determined that without quick action, the young girl would die of shock and blood loss. A transfusion was required, and several of the uninjured orphans matched her blood type.

The doctor spoke some broken Vietnamese, and the nurse spoke a smattering of high school French. Using that combination and some impromptu sign language, they tried to explain the need for a blood transfusion to the frightened children. Then they asked for a donor. After several moments of silence, a small boy named Heng raised his hand, lowered it quickly, then slowly raised it again.

Heng was quickly laid on a pallet, his arm was swabbed, and the needle was inserted. A moment later, he let out a shuddering sob, covering his face with his free hand. "Does it hurt," the doctor asked. Heng shook his head, but he continued to cry, screwing his eyes tightly shut. The doctor and nurse were concerned, something was obviously very wrong. Just then, a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help. Seeing Heng's distress, she spoke rapidly to him in Vietnamese. She listened to his reply and spoke soothingly to him in return. After a moment, Heng stopped crying and a look of relief came over his small face.

The nurse spoke quietly to the Americans, "He thought he was dying," she said. "He misunderstood you. He thought you asked him to give all of his blood so the girl could live."

"But why would he be willing to do that," the nurse asked. After the Vietnamese nurse translated the question, Heng answered simply, "Because she is my friend."

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for a friend."

If this weren't challenging enough, Jesus had some other very frank words about how we are supposed to risk love. And this is where I got prickly. Hear his words in the Sermon on the

Mount in Matthew 5, "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? "

Ouch. Is anyone else besides me feeling prickly yet? So let's get real about this, who is it harder for you to love right now our governor or our president? The protestors or the police? Hate may be too strong a word, but who in your family or your neighborhood are you struggling to love as a fellow child of God? Perhaps it's a parent, or a spouse, or one of your children who has deeply hurt or offended you. Who are you finding difficult to forgive, much less love right now? Jay and I live in a very close-knit neighborhood, but there are two people on our block who can be very abrasive ó they always seem to be stirring up something. If I'm honest, I'm struggling to love them both lately. And like many of you, I struggle to love some of the people making the news in these challenging days.

Although it's hard to admit, if we're honest, we all harbor some hate in our hearts from time to time. In the book, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, Alice Walker asks this: "Watching you hold your hatred for such a long time I wonder: Isn't it slippery? Might you not someday drop it on yourself? I wonder: Where does it sleep if ever? And where do you deposit it while you feed your children or sit in the lap of the one who cherishes you? There is no graceful way to carry hatred. While hidden it is everywhere."

Hate is a poisonous weed that chokes out love, so how do we continue to pull those weeds out of our hearts and make room for the fruit of love to grow? First, we must acknowledge that the weeds are there and be willing to let God pull them. Sometimes it is easier

to let go of the weeds if we step back and broaden our perspective. Mary Lou Kownacki is a Benedictine nun and long-time peacemaker. She invests her life in the inner city of Erie, Pennsylvania, surrounded by poor families trying to survive and keep hope alive amidst drugs, violence, and despair, and that was all pre-COVID days. She says, "There isn't anyone you couldn't love once you've heard their story." What if we took time to stop and really listen to those we struggle to love? What if we put ourselves in their shoes? What if we began to pray for them regularly as Jesus commands us to? Now let me be clear, loving someone as ourselves, and as God would have us love them, does not mean that we become doormats. Sometimes godly love is tough love. But what would it mean for us to weed out the roots of hatred and bitterness by broadening our perspectives and really being present with others?

The next thing that helps me is remembering that God has modeled and embodied this kind of love for us. In other words, God isn't asking us to do anything that God hasn't already done. God first risked love by creating us with free will. God could have created us to love him automatically and without question – but God knew that this is not how real love works. Instead, God chose to give us a choice. When we continued to struggle with living into that choice, God took the enormous risk of becoming Immanuel, God with us. This risk of love cost Jesus his very life. (PAUSE)

The third thing that helps me is remembering that people are more important than my principles. This really is a hard one. Michael Gerson, conservative columnist for the Washington Post said it this way, "This is the strange alchemy of empathy. We serve our principles best by loving people even more than our principles." He added, "We need religious leaders – and I would put everyone in this room and on Zoom in this group – we need religious leaders who will emphasize the 'imago dei,' the Image of God in others, not the controversy of the day."

It took almost a decade for Jamel McGee to risk love, to see the image of God in Andrew Collins and to love him more than he loved his principles. Back in 2005, Jamel was walking down the street in Benton Harbor Michigan when Andrew Collins arrested him for stealing drugs. The problem? It wasn't true. Later, former officer Collins admitted to falsifying the arrest report. He later confessed, "That morning I said I was gonna make sure I had a drug arrest today, and I ended up putting an innocent man in prison."

Jamel was later exonerated, but not until after he lost everything and spent four years in jail for a crime he didn't commit. When he was released, he had one singular goal, to find Collins and hurt him.

In the meantime, Collins was caught and sentenced to a year and a half in prison for falsifying many police reports, for planting drugs, and stealing.

In 2016, they both ended up at Mosaic, a faith based employment agency where they now work side-by-side in the same small café. In these cramped quarters, they had no choice but to face each other.

In a TV news interview, Collins recalls, I told Jamel, "Honestly I have no explanation, all I can do is say I'm sorry."

Jamel reports, "That was pretty much what I needed to hear."

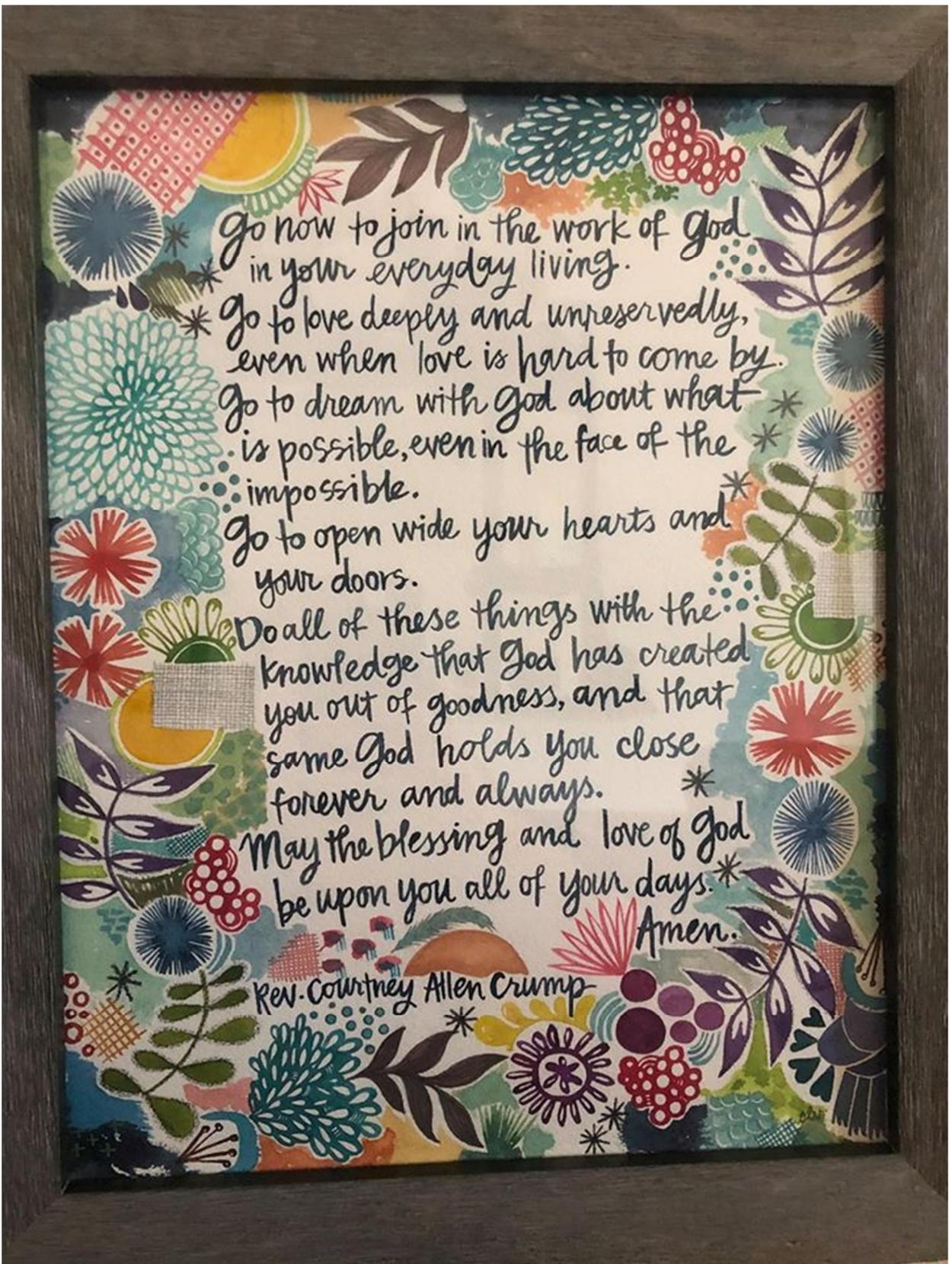
Now the two are fast friends, they hang out together outside of work and spend time talking about their lives. Then one day, Jamel told Andrew that he loved him. Andrew said, "I started weeping. He doesn't owe me that, I don't deserve that."

Steve Hartman, the interviewer then asked Jamel, "Did you forgive Andrew for his sake or for yours?"

Without hesitation Jamel answered, "Not just us, referring to he and Jamel, but for our sake (indicating all of us). Today, Jamel shares his faith regularly and hopes for a kinder humanity. He and Andrew travel widely giving talks about forgiveness and redemption.

(PAUSE)

How do we risk that kind of love? Mother Theresa put it quite simply, "The highest form of worship is to find the least among you and treat them like Jesus." Friends, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends. Thanks be to God that love wins.



Go now to join in the work of God
in your everyday living.

* Go to love deeply and unreservedly,
even when love is hard to come by.

Go to dream with God about what
is possible, even in the face of the
impossible.

Go to open wide your hearts and
your doors.

Do all of these things with the
knowledge that God has created
you out of goodness, and that
same God holds you close
forever and always.

May the blessing and love of God
be upon you all of your days.*
Amen.

Rev. Courtney Allen Crump

