



EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

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WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

We live in a world obsessed with the idea of love. Who among us has not desired for it at some level? We talk about it, we sing about it, we make movies about it; and yet, the more we hanker after it, the lesser it seems we can fully grasp it. It remains one of the most powerful but elusive experiences of life.

One look at our world today and we cannot escape its vivid reality: pain, suffering, fear and hurting individuals roam our street corners and our by-lanes each day. With our own experiences of shattered love stories and broken hearts, we can relate to the old-time favorite song *'What's love got to do with it?'* by Tina Turner. *'What's love got to do, got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?'*

Is there a lasting solution for a broken heart?

The answer is yes. No matter what threshold of life we find ourselves at, God's plan for us is not subject to, nor shaped by our circumstances; but rather fulfilled in His unfailing, unconditional love. God loves us just as we are, even in the frailty and struggle with which we live in. He loves us at a



profoundly deeper level, for He loves us unconditionally. He sees who we are. He loves us in truth. He loves us knowing that we cannot love Him back the same way.

The moral benchmark of the supreme ethic of Love is God Himself. 1 John 4:9-10 says, *"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. 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."*

God did not love us because we were good, charitable, lovely and religious. Rather, in love He gave Himself to us and for us, so we could know love and love like Him. We can love only because we are loved. We can give only because we have been given (John 3:16).

William Shakespeare once said, *"Love sought is good, but given unsought is better."*





“Each one of us is a story of God’s Love.”

POPE FRANCIS



THIRSTING AT THE WELL

From our earliest memories at catechism, we remember our first lesson: *Why did God create you?* The answer is always a definite one: *'God created me to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him.'*

We wonder what happens to that quest as we grow up. As our interests in life change over time, so do our interests for the divine, and yet, this quest still remains within us, it never goes away. The bitter circumstances of life may either deepen this quest, lead us away or bury it altogether. However, nothing changes the fact that we are seeking and thirsting for something beyond ourselves.

The famed C. S Lewis points out, *"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world"* - this 'world' is heaven and in reality we all ache for this eternal home in our soul.

No matter what we acquire in life, whether it be wealth, popularity or success, regardless of how many pleasures we immerse ourselves into, there is a drowning sense of emptiness for more and a thirst our parched souls cannot quite make sense of. We realize quickly that life is not sustained by food, fame or pleasure alone. There is more.



The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) tells us, *“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to Himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for”* (CCC 27).

We desire ‘love’ because love has been deposited into our very souls by God Himself. God desires an intimate relationship with us and He invites us into this relationship by virtue of our baptism through the Power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). At our baptism, there is an indelible mark placed on our soul. This is the mark of God’s love, marking us forever as beloved sons and daughters and setting us apart for great things.

We intuitively recognize authentic love and are changed by it, because we are marked by God’s love. But we also instantly recognize counterfeit or imitation love. We know when we are abused and taken advantage of. The reason we recognize this, is because we are not made for the superficial or ordinary; we are made for authentic love.

Of all the stories in the Bible, the one that speaks directly to our ‘thirst’ for love is the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, found in John’s Gospel (John 4). John the Evangelist beautifully unmask what lies behind the seemingly routine chore of fetching water.

Clearly, the Samaritan woman faced ethnic rejection. We draw this quickly from the hour she comes to draw water - late in the afternoon under scorching heat, when no one is there. We are tempted to judge her and dismiss her loneliness, even attributing it for notorious behavior, for she had five failed marriages (John 4:18).

But behind the pursuit for pleasure was a woman in pain. She had no clue that this stranger at the well was waiting to take her fragmented past and weave it again towards purpose and meaning. Even in the broken threads of failed relationships and sin, God was ever present. He was present in her mess and His love for her remained unchanged.



In the humility of Christ at the well, the Samaritan woman discovered the greatest fulfillment of her thirst, wrapped in His extravagant love. In Him, her thirst was finally met and fully satisfied.

Fr. Paul N. Check, founder of Courage International, says, *'Jesus urgent words "I thirst" convey a spiritual, sublime invitation to which we must respond...indeed, for which we are made. The Savior of the world longs ardently for the soul-water, the love, of His people. The human soul is created to thirst for God even as God deeply desires the love of man.'*

Think about this truth: God, who is transcendent, omnipotent and all sufficient, thirsts for the love of man. He desires to spend eternity with us. He desires to give us an eternal home; the place we ultimately belong.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- 1. We are marked as sons and daughters by virtue of our Baptism.**
- 2. We thirst because God first thirsts for us.**
- 3. God created me to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him.**
- 4. What am I thirsting for? What fulfillment have I found through this thirst?**



'If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.'

C. S. LEWIS



MADE FOR MORE

Have you ever taken time to ponder on the marvel of the human finger print? No two persons in the world are alike. They may share the same parents, the same birth date, but are intricately different in their DNA and personhood. The complexity of the human body still puzzles the scientific world, leaving many questions unanswered.

A renowned Christian apologist, who called God the '*Divine Script Writer*' said that we are the script and God writes the story. Indeed, this is the greatest love story the world has ever known.

The story of every human begins with this truth: You are not an accident! You are not some product of casual encounters or meaningless experiences. You exist for a reason. Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, "*Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary.*" This means that God was thinking of you even before He made the world. In fact, that is why He created it! God designed this planet's environment, just so we could live in it. Long before you were conceived by your parents, you were conceived in the mind of God. We are the focus of His love and the object of His affection. It is not fate or chance, luck or coincidence that you are breathing at this very moment. You are alive.



David expressed this truth in Psalm 139 where he declared that he was fearfully and wonderfully made, proclaiming the wonder of God's knowledge to think of us even before the world began (Ephesians 1:4).

But what about those who are born out of wedlock and are unplanned? Even them, they are known by a personal God. The CCC affirms, *"Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead"* (CCC 357).

This is what gives us dignity and this is what sets us apart. This is why regardless of the circumstances of our birth or our family history, the God who created us in His own image has a plan for our lives and has deposited greatness and sanctity in us.

You are not an accident because God never does anything accidentally. He never makes mistakes. Your race, the color of your skin, your personality and ethnicity are part of His divine love. He has lovingly planned your talent, potential and uniqueness, personally and purposefully.

It is worth mentioning that God did not create us out of necessity. This is very crucial in our understanding of God's love. He created us because He loves us. C.S Lewis wrote *"God who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them"*.

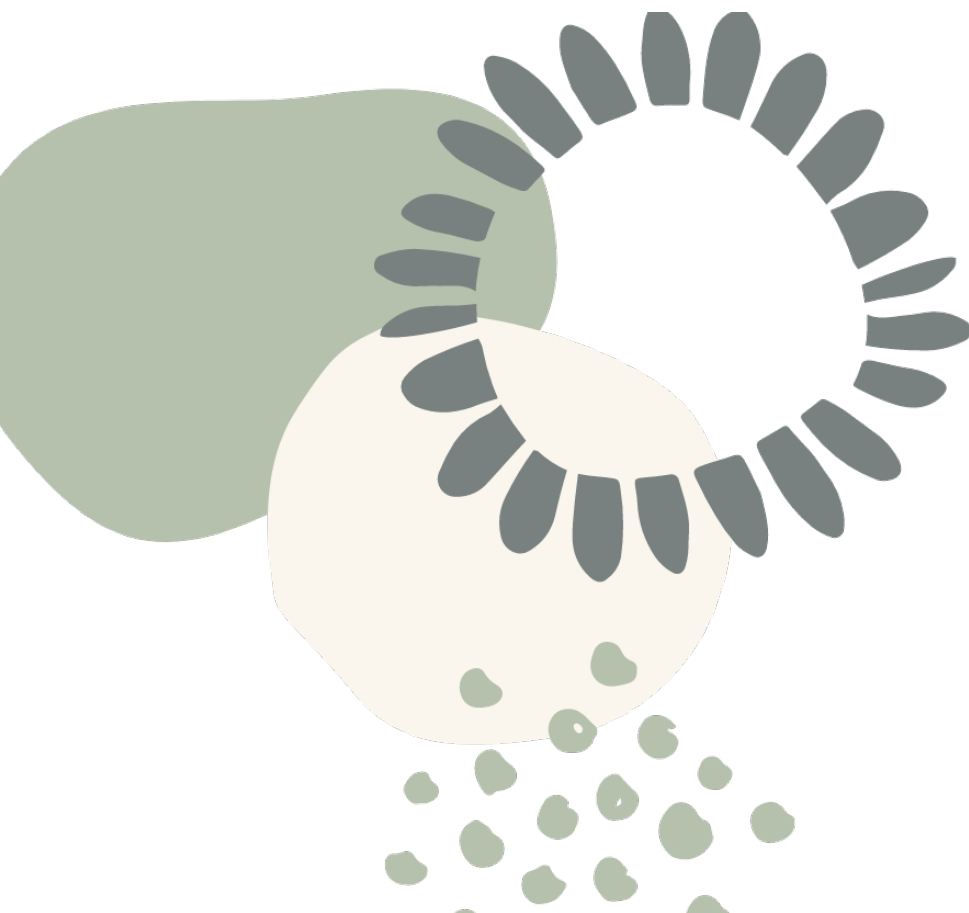
"St. Bonaventure explains that God created all things not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it, for God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness: Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand" (CCC 293: 135,136).



In recognizing the complete sovereignty and holiness of God, we are amazed that God would take mortal man and crown him with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5).

Nothing in our life is arbitrary. Everything is marked with purpose. We are made for love and our life has profound meaning! This is the reference point: God's love. Everything finds meaning and purpose because of it.

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am He, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save" (Isaiah 46:3-4)





***“Each of us is the result of a
thought of God.
Each of us is willed.
Each of us is loved.
Each of us is necessary.”***

EMERITUS POPE BENEDICT XVI



THE SOURCE OF JOY

Why do people have a hard time believing that God loves them? Perhaps they grew up in a home where love was not tangibly felt with words or actions. Perhaps they experienced abandonment, rejection and abuse.

When we are betrayed and hurt, we tend to project these human experiences onto God. We conclude that we are unlovable. Our worldview of God's character is limited by our false perceptions when we position God as distant and cold, away from the daily affairs of our life. On the other hand, there is a tendency to look at the condition of the world and not find reason to fit God's love in the equation of suffering. Other times, poverty, sicknesses, failed academic pursuits may fuel thoughts that suggest God is not interested in us, that He is angry, waiting to punish us for our mistakes.

Such a worldview of God is not only unfortunate, it is also incorrect.

The Psalmist says in Psalm 16:11, *"You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore"*. God is the source of joy and of all things beautiful. Saint Paul puts it this way: *"For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"* (1 Corinthians 4:7). God affords us the greatest joy if we only believe and trust in Him.

The truth that God is personal, near and wants to be involved in the smallest details of our life is a comforting and assuring truth. Knowing that His agape love does not change with circumstances, time or even sin and failure, brings hope and gives courage to this Christian journey especially during difficult times.

The English poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907) called God *"The Hound of Heaven"* and St Augustine rightfully pointed out *"God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."*





***“Every man is a story of love
that God writes on this earth.”***

POPE FRANCIS



GOD AS 'ABBA'

Throughout scripture, God is depicted in various images in order that we understand both His attribute and His loving responsibility and care towards us. For example, in the Old Testament, God is depicted as Shepherd and Guardian (Genesis 49:24), One who binds up wounds and restores (Ezekiel 34:11-12), as King enthroned in Heaven (Psalm 103: 19), Leader of all nations (Psalm 22:29), Savior (Isaiah 33:22), a Father who loves His children (Hosea 11:1), and a Husband who rejoices in His bride (Isaiah 62:5). Yet, among all these beautiful images, the one that cries for most attention is the image of 'God as Father'.

In Jewish culture, however, the notion of God as Father was not a new concept to the Jews. God was understood as Father but more in the sense of being Creator, Protector, and Redeemer. Nowhere in Judaism was God understood to come close as 'My Father'. When Jesus introduced God as "*Abba*" - (in Aramaic which means daddy, dada), it was nothing short of scandalous. How could this God who is so holy and transcendent come down to the level of man?

Yet this is what Jesus came to heal and reveal, the fatherhood of God. Christ's entire ministry points us back to the Father, from the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), to His farewell sermon at the last supper (John 14-17), to His dying breath and shout of "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46), Jesus reveals the fatherhood of God. He is a Father who is strong and firm, yet gentle and tender.

Today, the word 'Father' to many may invoke immense pain and bring heartache rather than joy. For those whose fathers have been absent in their responsibility or have wounded them, the fatherhood of God may appear challenging.

Yet, even in this challenge the greatest comfort we can acquire is to know that we are children of God. In 1 John 3:1 John writes, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are*". We are also assured that our Father will never forsake us or abandon us (Hebrews 13:5).

PAUSE AND PONDER

- 1. What is your perception of God? How do you see Him?**
- 2. How easy or difficult it is to see God as father? Why?**
- 3. 'I am a child of God'. How do you resonate with this truth?**





GOD IS LOVE

In order to now arrive at a good grasp on this definition of love, it is important that we quickly look at love as the Greeks defined it. In the original translation of the Bible, the Greeks defined love under four categories.

Storge: familial love, a word for the bond that exists between one who loves and persons, animals, and things that surround him. It is most related to family members.

Philia: pertains to friends, freely chosen because of mutual compatibility and common values.

Eros: pertains to passion, not only of a sexual nature, but also of an aesthetic or spiritual nature, for what is conceived of as supremely beautiful and desirable.

Agape: is manifested when one person has much to give to another needier. It is generous self-donation without concern for reward or that which expects nothing in return.

When we define *agape* love, we truly fall short of words. In layman's language we could use synonyms like self-forgetfulness, self-giving, self-sacrificing or one that always sees the interest of another even to the



point of death. It is also worthwhile to add that *agape* is not about emotions or feelings but rather a decision. Forgiveness, an aspect of *agape*, is given even when one is hurt and deeply wounded.

1 John 4:8 tells us God is love. Love is not something God does. Love is who God is. Saint Thomas Aquinas helps us further by defining love this way, *“To love is to will the good of the other”*.

Understanding this *agape* love becomes the foundation and basis of all human love. If not, our love will be strained, demanding, unholy, self-centered and temporary. Unlike our secular culture that asks, “What can you give me?” *Agape* love seeks to ask, “What can I give you?”

The answer is: everything. God gave us His Son (John 3:16).

PAUSE AND PONDER

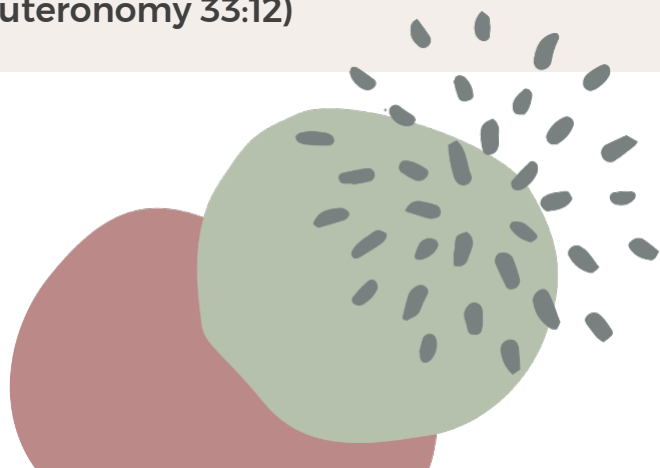
Go deep into the attributes of God and identify which one or more speaks to your life today. Picture God asking ‘what can I do for you’?

COMPASSIONATE (Read: Isaiah 49:15-16)

NURTURING (Read: Isaiah 46:3-4)

COMFORTING (Read: Isaiah 66:10-13)

PROTECTING (Read: Deuteronomy 33:12)





GOD GAVE HIS SON

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life”
John 3:16.

This is the heart of the Gospel. Even when all seems lost, God intervenes, offering man salvation and joy. God, in fact, doesn't stand apart, but enters into the history of humanity, He 'involves' Himself in our life; He enters it, to animate it with His grace and to save it.

Pope Francis says, *“This is the simplest expression that summarizes the whole Gospel, all of faith and all of theology: God loves us with a free and boundless love.”* *“If in creation the Father has given us the proof of His great love by giving us life, in the passion of His Son He has given us the sum of all proofs: He has come to suffer and die for us. And this love that is so great is the mercy of God, because He loves us, He forgives us.”*

1 John 4:10 says *“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.”* God always takes the first step towards us in love.



This is *agape* love. It is evident in the Father's refusal to abandon us, even when we fail.

It is often in the harrowing moments of our life: a parents' divorce, an academic failure, betrayal of a trusted friend, death of a loved one, where God leaves a defining mark. In all of these scarred moments, we hear His voice crying out in our memories, "I was there." God has been in our past. God is here today. God will be there in our future.

How do you know that God loves you? While you and I were yet lost and wandering, Christ was seeking after us, pursuing us by way of the Cross. His sacrifice stands as the greatest marker for love in all history.





“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

JOHN 3:16 (NRSV)