

## Evotional

**Sermon title: “Love extravagantly.”**

**Speaker: Neil Durling.**

**Bible passage: 1 Corinthians 13:13.**

**Date: 17.11.13.**

### **Message:**

**Imagine a spouse who is always correcting their partner! Is that love?** We have a God who loves us, so why is it, then, that we often just seem to hear correction from Him? The early Christians adopted a Greek word to describe God’s love (*agape*) because the other words meaning ‘love’ didn’t quite capture it. It conjures up giving to someone else at our personal expense. It’s not doing what the person desires but what the giver believes they need. It is an inner force which compels someone to perform an action which gives pleasure. It is an action word.

**John places it on the lips of Jesus** (for example, John 3:16) but none of the other synoptic writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke ) do. Jesus is simply not recorded in the Synoptic gospels as using this word for love to express God’s love for humanity. Rather, he revealed it; he acted it out. How? By:

- His countless acts of compassionate healing (Mk.1:40-42 – filled with compassion for the leper; Lk.7:11-17 – Jesus’ heart went out to the widow in Nain when her only son died).
- His teaching about God’s acceptance of sinners (Lk.15:1-32 – Lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son).
- His grief-stricken attitude to human disobedience (Lk.19:41-48 – Jesus weeps over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday).
- Being a friend of tax collectors, prostitutes and outcasts (Mt.9:9-15 – Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector and then eats at the party Matthew throws).

Rodney Stark, in his book *The rise of Christianity*, points to two great diseases in the first couple of centuries after Jesus as catalysts for the growth of Christianity. As people left their loved-ones to die, Christians took them in and tried to nurse them back to health. This was love in action and it made people stop and stare and think.

A while later Augustine wrote the following in *De Doctrina Christiana*:

“So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine Scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up his double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.”

What grabbed me is that Augustine says; if we don’t love, it doesn’t matter how much we know about love. Doing is success, merely knowing is falling short. Secondly, he says; even if we contradict scripture in our desire to explain God’s love, we haven’t made a fatal error or lied.

### **So what is this love like?**

- *Loss*: The most vulnerable words we can say to another are “I love you”. We give the other person power in our lives. If we love without expecting anything in return, there will be times when we are betrayed and all the effort we put in is not valued.
- *Outdated*: We live in a world where we “look after number one!” and put “us and ours first”. Surely, it is sensible to do this – how many children hate church because their parents were always there and never with them whilst growing up? But God’s love isn’t self-focussed. Having said that God’s view of love is outdated in our world, I can’t help but notice that there are many times when love is poured out abundantly by those who have no time for God (The Philippines response being a prime example).
- *Visible*: People must see our love. It doesn’t mean we force it down their throat with a Bible tract; but there hopefully comes a time when they join the dots of our faith and our actions? More importantly, God sees our loving action.
- *Eternal*: This kind of love will make differences that go on beyond this life.

**How about this story about Keisha Thomas** (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24653643>)?



In 1996, a black teenager protected a white man from an angry mob who thought he supported the racist Ku Klux Klan. It was an act of extraordinary courage and kindness - and is still inspiring people today.

Keisha Thomas was 18 when the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist organisation, held a rally in her home town in Michigan.

Liberal, progressive and multicultural, Ann Arbor was an unusual place for the KKK to choose, and hundreds of people gathered to show them they were not welcome.

The atmosphere was tense, but controlled. Police dressed in riot gear and, armed with tear gas, protected a small group of Klansmen in white robes and conical hoods. Thomas was with a group of anti-KKK demonstrators on the other side of a specially-erected fence. Then a woman with a megaphone shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd."

They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a Confederate flag T-shirt. He tried to walk away from them, but the protesters, including Thomas, followed, "just to chase him out".

It was unclear whether the man was a Ku Klux Klan supporter, but to the anti-KKK protesters, his clothes and tattoos represented exactly what they had come to resist. The Confederate flag he wore was, for them, a symbol of hatred and racism, while the SS tattoo on his arm pointed to a belief in white supremacy, or worse. There were shouts of "Kill the Nazi" and the man began to run - but he was knocked to the ground. A group surrounded him, kicking him and hitting him with the wooden sticks of their placards. Mob mentality had taken over. "It became barbaric," says Thomas. "When people are in a crowd they are more likely to do things they would never do as an individual. Someone had to step out of the pack and say, 'This isn't right.'"

So the teenager, then still at high school, threw herself on top of a man she did not know and shielded him from the blows. "When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down." For Mark Brunner, a student photographer who witnessed the episode, it was *who* she saved that made Thomas' actions so remarkable. "She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her," he says. "Who does that in this world?" So what gave Thomas the impetus to help a man whose views, it appeared, were so different from her own? Her religious beliefs played a part, but her own experience of violence was a factor, too. "I knew what it was like to be hurt," she says. "The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me." The circumstances - which she does not want to describe - were different "But violence is violence - nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea."

Thomas has never heard from the man she saved, but she did once meet a member of his family. Months later, someone came up to her in a coffee shop and said thanks. "What for?" she asked. "That was my dad," the young man replied. For Thomas, the fact that the man had a son gave her actions even greater significance - she had potentially prevented further violence. "For the most part, people who hurt... they come from hurt. It is a cycle. Let's say they had killed him or hurt him really bad. How does the son feel? Does he carry on the violence?"

Teri Gunderson, who was bringing up her two adopted, mixed-race daughters in Iowa at the time, was so touched by Thomas' story that she kept a copy of her picture - and still looks at it 17 years later. Gunderson even thinks the student made her a better person. "The voice in my head says something like this, 'If she could protect a man [like that], I can show kindness to this person.' And with that encouragement, I do act with more kindness. I don't know her, but since then I am more kind." But she asks herself whether she could be as brave as Thomas. What if one of the hurtful people who had racially abused her girls was in danger, she wonders. "Would I save them, or would I stand there and say, 'You deserved it, you were a jerk.' I just don't know the answer to that, yet. Maybe that is why I am so struck by her."

Brunner and Gunderson both often think of the teenager's actions. But Thomas, now in her 30s and living in Houston, Texas, does not. She prefers to concentrate on what more she can do in future, rather than what she has achieved in the past. "I don't want to think that this is the best I could ever be. In life you are always striving to do better." Thomas says she tries to do something to break down racial stereotypes every day. No grand gestures - she thinks that small, regular acts of kindness are more important. "The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge monumental act."

Looking back at his photos of Thomas pushing back the mob that day in June 1996, Brunner says: "We would all like to be a bit like Keshia, wouldn't we? She didn't think about herself. She just did the right thing."

**Jesus said: "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34) That means practical action.**

### Questions:

1. Do you hear more love or more correction from God?
2. Has Neil made too much of the observation in Matthew, Mark and Luke about Jesus showing us rather than telling us about God's love?
3. Do you agree that living out God's love will result in loss?
4. Do you agree that living out God's love is outdated in this day and age?
5. Do you agree that living out God's love needs to be visible?
6. Do you agree that living out God's love will have eternal results?
7. How did you feel as you read/heard Keisha Thomas' story?

### Prayer:

Father God, thank you that you acted to show me how much you love me. Amen.