

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

Love Actually

1 John 4:7-12

July 20, 2025

There was a movie that came out in 2003. Millennials know it well. I watched it for the first time with a boy I was hopelessly and helplessly in love with at the time. Ten years later, I watched it again with the guy that would become my husband as we determined whether or not we were to become an item. In a bid to woo me, he asked one mid-December afternoon, "So, what do you want to watch tonight... how about *Love Actually*?" And in that moment, I knew.

Love Actually is now a movie that critics love to hate. It's an ensemble cast overflowing with household names: Emma Thompson, Bill Nighy, Laura Linney, Hugh Grant, Keira Knightly. I could go on. It's a Christmas movie. It follows the lives of these endless cast members in the month of December as their experiences and life events intertwine serendipitously. It is set in London. And it all comes to a glorious, sob-worthy end on Christmas Eve as romantic intentions are pursued and declared and celebrated in dramatic fashion. I get why this is not actually a good movie, but that doesn't stop me from loving it from beginning until end.

It begins with a montage of loved ones reuniting after travel, with Hugh Grant's voice narrating. He says, "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge; they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaking suspicion love actually is all around."

If quotations like the one I just shared or even passages of scripture like the one just read sound a little woo-woo, a little saccharine, a little "too much," like they are grasping, straining to articulate what can't be explained, going overboard explaining what can, maybe it's because describing love—like describing God—brings out this ineptitude and the limits of language.

In 1 John, the writer uses the word *love* in almost all of its forms. It is a noun, a verb, an adjective, a superlative. It is something to possess, something to do, something to behold. It is the measure, the way, and the goal. The writing reflects another letter in the New Testament, when in a similar moment of spirited overflow, the Apostle Paul describes love in a way that it is as unrealistic as it is true:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable. It keeps no record of wrongs. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

In 1 John, the author goes even farther. Love is not only something we possess, something we do, something to behold, but God IS love. Love itself is the beginning, the source, the fountain and essence of life itself, the energy that sustains all that is and all that will ever be. God is love.

I used to receive text messages from a friend who died last November. My phone would ding at 2 PM on a random Tuesday and it would be this lovely, daring friend of mine with a brief message: "I love you, Sara." When this friend of mine was a teenager, she had a conversion experience at an evangelical Christian camp that may

have failed the doctrinal tests of the elders in charge, but it did not fail to change her life. She was overwhelmed with the revelation of God's love and with an exuberant and awkward lunge into all that lay beyond that moment, she accepted it as Truth and vowed to live and die by that truth. Confirming its efficacy, this friend loved others deeply and widely, and a terminal diagnosis unearthed an even more unhinged response. The mere thought of someone, a remembrance of their virtue or pain, a longing to connect—this friend of mind wouldn't miss a beat—and so those of us fortunate enough to be known by her have a treasure trove of "I love you's" in our phones. I've often wondered—since we're all living with a terminal diagnosis—why we don't have the same practice.

As serious as the imperative to love one another is, the scripture we explore today is a statement about God first. To love as God loves, we must first receive that love. This faith statement reminds me of an experience I had during my seminary years. I was completing an internship at a faith-based advocacy organization in Chicago, and as part of that formation, I met with a cohort of other seminarians who were completing similar internships at different organizations in the city. We met weekly to discuss our shared reading, to wonder about the church and society, to debate the finer points of missiology, to vent about our workplace inefficiencies and supervisors. We grew close. As the summer and our internships came to an end, we promised to keep in touch. And then at our last gathering, we were thrown for a loop. The curriculum—and our fearless leader—called for us to fill a bowl with water and to sit in a circle. Then in silence and with great deliberation, we were to kneel before each other and wash each other's feet. After the neighbor to your left washed and dried your feet, you would wash the feet on the neighbor to your right. And on and on until everyone's feet had been washed.

My cohort complied even as we stifled our giggling and mostly avoided eye contact. We would later learn—at the national gathering with cohorts like ours from cities across the country—that some had flat out refused to participate in this ritual. It was, for some, that uncomfortable. That triggering.

When we reflected on this experience as a large assembly, an interesting pattern emerged: most experienced discomfort in this ritual that was intended to nurture and strengthen. But the bulk of that discomfort was experienced as a receiver rather than a giver. Washing a friend's feet was one thing, but sitting there and allowing someone to wash yours was quite another. We noted the apologies that abounded. Apparently, we all had feet that were just absolutely horrendous: strangely shaped, rough, ticklish, smelly. Un-loveable. Our shame was loud.

In the Gospel According to John, we learn that Jesus invited his disciples to partake in a foot-washing ritual in his final evening with them. For them, a common custom upon entering a new home. What made it different that night was the person doing the washing. Customarily, it was a servant, someone whose job it was to wash a guest's feet after a long journey. But as the story goes—*you all know it*—Jesus took the towel and dipping it in a bowl of water and wringing it out—he knelt before his friends and washed them.

And there was one, Simon Peter, who could not stand for this. "Jesus, you are not going to wash my feet." You can almost see his ears flushing.

But Jesus is adamant. Not so gentle, even as he invites Simon Peter to receive his gentleness. "Friend, you have no part of me unless you let me do this for you."

In this exchange, mere hours before Jesus would be arrested and taken away, we see the risk of love, the way the highest love demands a kind of vulnerability most of us would rather do without.

We catch glimpses of love's power to undo us in our own lives, just through the simple phrase "I love you." The first time you find yourself saying it to a partner, with no guarantee it will be returned. When after being burned by love you hear it from another, and you must decide whether to stay or whether to run. As your young child says it to you and rather than unfettered joy you are hit with a tsunami of overwhelm and the horror of imagining anything bad ever happening to them. When you're

hanging up the phone with a long-distance friend and say it because “okay talk to you later” just doesn’t suffice but you’re unsure they can handle it.

For as liberally as the phrase “I love you” can pass through our lips, our gratitude should be running deep, because there is nothing small, or inconsequential, or inevitable about it. It begins with reception of Divine Love—real, risky, total surrender to a love that sees all of us and doesn’t let us go. (*Yikes!*) It is perfected—as the writer of our epistle puts it—in *us*, when we dare to reflect it in our relationships on this side of eternity.

Let us love one another like that, the Word proclaims. If we want to *know* God—this God we’ve never seen but only known through the love that walks around down here, then let us love. And if we long to see this God we’ve never seen, then look around. Love is the revelation of God. And where we see love, my friends, we see God.

I chose this scripture months ago when sermon titles were due, not knowing this would be my last Sunday with you all. And so, as I’ve danced with this text of all texts this week, I’ve been granted the gift of memory, remembering and giving thanks for all the times and places I’ve seen God’s love revealed in this place. This is my short list:

The time an older child guided two four-year-olds down the chancel steps and out the sanctuary doors, all the way down the hall to the children’s chapel. It was the first time those littles had left this space without the firm and loving guidance of a parent, and they were visibly nervous. Without prompting or expectation, a 7-year-old leapt into action.

The time someone got overheated in this sanctuary and went unconscious for a few heavy minutes, and one of our deacons held his head in her lap as she tenderly traced his face with an ice cube.

The time I found one of our newest staff members sitting on the bench outside the atrium with someone who had come seeking help. He was suffering from an episode of acute psychosis, and she entered his world just enough to gain his trust, keeping him calm until more help arrived.

The time seventy-plus VBS volunteers gathered to wave to a camera on the balcony, sending a message to a child among us who was receiving treatment for cancer, her absence keenly felt as we waved and wiped away tears.

The time a toddler was being baptized at that font, and she reached in for the water, bringing it to her own head, and this place smiled all at once.

I could go on.

Instead, I’ll leave you with an image. One of my greatest honors as a pastor is coming alongside families as they do the hard work of letting go and honoring their loved ones who have passed. I’ve led funerals for lifelong Presbyterians and for people whose aching loved ones never considered the need for the church until the unthinkable happened. I’ve led them for the deeply faithful, for the doubting, for the seeking, for the unbelieving. I’ve led them for the very old and the very young and everyone in-between. I’ll tell you what runs through them all: *love*. The awareness of it, the reverence for it, very often a new commitment to it.

I find especially that when the deceased is considered “too young to die,” or the circumstances surrounding their death are tragic, things like *hope* and *faith* can be hard. Even offensive. I see it in the eyes of those gathered when I speak those words. But when a whole room is heaving, spilling over with people who are spilling over with grief, love isn’t polarizing. Faith, probably. Hope, most definitely. But love, never. That this person grieved was loved, did love, and was held by love, capital L—this language touches and confirms what the gathered know to be true, even if they’re only recognizing it by virtue of their grief for the very first time. Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul tells us that faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love. We humans *get* love. It must be because we are made in the image of God who *is* love.

I have a mentor and friend who liked to begin conversations that were hard to begin, and end conversations that were hard to end, with the invitation to answer two questions:

What do you know? And what do you hope?

And so, as my time with you draws to a close, and we end this conversation, I leave you with what I know: the abiding love of God has been revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And despite our long lists of evidence to the contrary, that love is actually all around.

And what I hope: that living through the One whom God sent, you might continue to know and to reflect that love in a way that generates more love in this congregation, this community, this city, and everywhere that God calls you to live and serve.

Friends, may it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.