

Imperfect People Pursuing a Perfect Love

By Reverend Katie E. Hambrick

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What were you most grateful for this past year? When you sat around your table eating- or if you are like me in front of the TV watching football- what did you think about when reflecting on what you were thankful for?

Mine first went to Graham, but not just him as a person. I was grateful for the way Graham loves me, because he does it so well. I am going to confess to you all that one of my favorite hobbies is window shopping with the other being to debate philosophy. And by debate philosophy, I really mean argue. Not to mention my love for binge watching the real housewives of Beverly hills.

Graham really deserves a medal, because this man will give up his day off to go shopping with me. My favorite store to do this in is bath and body works. Poor Graham knows that when we get to Bath and Body works, even when I am just window shopping and don't plan to buy anything, that it will be at least 45 minutes. That is because I have to go around the store and smell every single candle that I have already smelled a million times before. He also knows that I am going to want to smell all my favorite scents multiple times.

Y'all, I do this multiple times a month. To put this in perspective for you, the women who work at the Bath and Body works at Briargate know my face. Window Shopping is my absolute favorite. And what does Graham do? He goes around the store with me. He smells every single candle with me. We will discuss for the hundredth time how mad I am that they discontinued the midnight pomegranate candle that has not been out since 2008. I am still bitter about that.

But Graham is so patient with me. He pretends to enjoy my window shopping and engages like he is excited during it. And heaven help him when we actually do go to really shop, because that is going to range from anywhere to 45 minutes to 2 hours. And again, he never complains. He just smiles and goes around the store with me... for however long it takes.

That is a very silly example of how Graham loves me. I do alot for him as well, he would tell you. However, the reason I tell you this is precisely because it is so silly. It is something so silly and so small to everyone looking in on us- but to me, it is one of those little things that really shows me how much he cares. That he is willing to give up his day off to go smell candles with me.

The more I started to reflect on Today's scripture, as well as what I was thankful for, I realized it didn't just stop with being thankful for Graham and how he loves me. I have really become thankful for love and my deeper understanding of love. One of the key reasons I have this deeper understanding of love is because of First Baptist. This church is truly a family- a family who cares deeply for each other and knows how to reflect the love of God.

Whether that be starting a meal train for a new family...

Or card showers during the height of COVID because even though we couldn't celebrate together in person, we needed to celebrate big life events...

Or leaving lucky charms outside the resident's door because you know she loves them...

Or scotch guarding the new couch in the youth area twice...

Or going and cleaning someone's house, who can't anymore...

Or taking care of someone after surgery because you know they don't have family in town...

Or simply calling someone to ask them how they are doing...

These are just a few true examples of ways people in this church family have shown love to each other. The list could go on and on. But, this church family has taught me truly what it means to love like God wants us too. That does not mean we always get it right or perfect- we know we are imperfect people.

However, we really do try to love each other well. We have even been able to do that through COVID, which is something to be grateful for. Especially after the past few years we have faced as a society.

See, Advent is the beginning of the new church calendar. It is a time of renewal. It is a time of great anticipation and hope as we are getting ready to celebrate the coming of the Christ child. We do this with meals together and celebrations of all sorts.

But, do we ever take time to reflect on what this really means for us as people of faith? I am referring to the blessing that is Advent. The blessing that comes with a renewed sense of hope. Every year, we get so busy celebrating that we hardly take time to stop and reflect. We save that for Lent. We don't bother with that now. Now is the time to party, and that's always not wrong. We should celebrate this time of the year. Especially after the past couple of years of not being able to celebrate together.

However, when I kept looking at today's scripture, one word really stuck out to me. It comes in verse 10- Restore. *PAUSE*

Restore by definition is to come back to a place of being. When Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonians, he is encouraging them to return to their faith center. Paul knows that faith is an ongoing process that is fueled by a couple of things: The first being hope.

As the author of Hebrews writes, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” Hope in God’s promises and faithfulness to us is the driving force for faith. It is the spark that lights up our souls and sets us on the path of love set before us by Christ. Hope is truly where our faith starts. We have to have hope in something to believe in it. *PAUSE*

Hope draws faith into maturity. *pause*

The other thing that fuels faith is love. This does not mean love as a noun, but love as a verb. We are intended to be loved and to love others. The Christian faith is centered on this. It is centered on the greatest commandments-

To love the lord your god with all your heart, soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.

Paul is asking the Thessalonians to return to their original source of faith. He is asking them to return and restore this sense of hope in God and God’s promises.

Why is Paul doing that? He tells us to verses down, so that God may make you increase and abound in love for one another. *PAUSE*

As the great Christian Theologian Richard Niebuhr said in reference to the greatest commandment, “the purpose of the church is increase of the love of God and neighbor.”

There is neither a simpler nor a more demanding depiction of faithful living than this.

PAUSE

I don't know about you, but I am tired. I am tired of trying to have hope while living in a world that seems to be full of devastation. I am tired of COVID. I am tired of loving people, who do not seem to want to be loved. And I am forever tired of trying to accept the unconditional love that is poured out onto me that I know I do not deserve. I wonder if I am the only one who gets tired?

PAUSE

The act of living, just simply living, can be tiring enough without adding the demands that comes from faithful living. *PAUSE* The truth is that we cannot pour from an empty cup. Most of the time when we are tired like that, it is because we have moved away from our faith center. We have gotten caught up in the living, that we forget the faith part. *slight pause*

We cannot abound in love when we have forgotten the hope and faith that inspire us to love. One way for us to fuel ourselves is to simply be present. To stop trying to do so much and just be present to what is going on around us. When we do this, we will see that God's promises are at work all around us. This will restore our hope.

Our hope that God's promises do ring true still. That God is here with us now. Another thing that helps us is to take a moment to reflect on what we are truly grateful for. To reflect on the love we have received and the love we have shared. Only when we pause to be still and reflect will we know that God is God. To pause and remember that God loves us unconditionally and fiercely- even as hard and as pain as that is to accept. It is hard to accept that God loves all of us, even our imperfections. But only when we stop to reflect and accept this truth, will our cups start to be refilled. *pause*

Filled and filled until they overflow with an increasing and abounding love for God and one another, just as Paul is saying in today's scripture. *pause*

We are not called to be perfect. God never asks that of us, and Paul acknowledges that in today's scripture. What we are asked to do is to love as we have been loved. When we work at this, when we put our hope in God's promises and love, then we will be seen as blameless.

Paul is not referencing a truly sinless blamelessness, but a blamelessness that comes from pursuing perfect love. The perfect love that comes from following the greatest commandments. The perfect love that comes from trying to love like the Christ child will come to earth and show us how to do. *pause*

This advent, let us celebrate, but let this celebration be full of moments to be still. May we get still enough to restore ourselves back to the hope that fuels our faith. May our faith be restored, so that we can continue to be imperfect people pursuing perfect love. AMEN.